Ghost in the Shell:SAC - The Conscious Collective

by saturnalius

Summary

A year after Solid State Society, the Major finds herself back at Section 9 and is dropped right into a new case. The Collective has begun to threaten people within the city. Can Section 9 solve the mystery of the Collective before it brings Niihama down to its knees?

Notes

Some chapters may become long. But it's GitS. It's expected.
Somehow it felt normal to return to these familiar halls in the Niihama building, even after being away for so long. After the Dejima crisis, she’d left, conflicted and needing to understand what she felt, what she knew. A year ago, the Solid State Society incident had pulled her back into the world of Section 9, yet she was still hesitant. She’d never told anyone what she learned when diving into that man’s mind, nor had Batou said what he’d seen.

A year ago, she’d had a talk with Batou, confessing she was uncertain what to do now, where to go, what purpose she could fulfill, how to be free of these constraints. She had thought about it for a year, slept on it, dove deep into the Net, but ultimately came to the same conclusion she’d thought a year ago. The Major belonged in Section 9. That was where she truly felt free.

She had entered the building in a black corset, tight pants, and a black jacket that trailed down to her knees. No one acted as if her appearance was out of the ordinary. In fact, she was a rather welcomed sight, greeted as if she’d simply been away on vacation.

“Welcome back, Major.” His arrival was marked by the familiar sound of his shoes and his cane on the floor. Aramaki greeted her, offering her a bit of a wry smile.

“It’s good to be back, Chief,” she nodded, not mentioning her reasoning, but it was likely he knew or had at least an understanding. “But if that wry smile is any indication, I’d say I’m in for quite the welcoming party.”

“It will be an exciting one, to say the least,” Aramaki agreed, beckoning her to follow. “I was just heading to the briefing room. You’ll find that it has changed.”

And changed it had. It was larger, more formal, with more seating and a larger screen. She recognized many of the faces, but there were a handful of new ones, including two women who sat near the back. Togusa stood at the front, images of the headquarters of Kotobuki Prosthetics flashing on the screen. The Major knew the name. Kotobuki was a forerunner in building highly sensitive, almost lifelike prosthetics.

Togusa paused in the middle of his sentence, staring up at the back of the room. “Major!”

“About damn time you returned for real, Major,” Batou scoffed with a bit of a grin. He knew Motoko would come around soon enough, returning to Section 9 to find that purpose she sought.
“Keeping us waiting this long.”

“Well at least I didn’t keep you forever,” she teased, but in truth, she wasn’t sure for much of the last three years that she would return. Yet now that she was here, it felt right.

But there was the matter of who would lead the teams. There were more now, more recruits, more fresh faces, and Togusa had led the teams for 3 years now. While she could certainly take lead, letting Togusa grow in his leadership position wasn’t a bad idea either. She’d leave the decision up to him and the Chief.

She focused silently on Togusa for a moment as he stared back at her. Proto glanced between the two, the only one seemingly uncertain what the two were thinking, but the girl sitting next to him seemed to be exuding sparkles of idolatry seeing the Major standing there.

“Let’s continue with the briefing,” Aramaki interjected, stepping forward and bringing information up on the screen. “As we all know, the Kotobuki headquarters disconnected from the Net early this morning, preventing exit or entry to its network and even the building itself. Despite the press blackout on the subject, bits and pieces of information have been surfacing on the Net with no real information we have to who is responsible for this.”

Motoko leaned against the back wall, folding her arms, listening to the detailed briefing. This sounded like an all-too-familiar scenario. A takeover of a building, a lockdown, another press blackout. What crawled out of the dark reaches of the Net this time?

“However,” Aramaki pointed out, blueprints now showing on the screen, “I managed to come in contact with the company that built the internal network system. The lockdown can be overridden by accessing a panel underneath the building, but there is only one way in. Once a hacking team is in, you will have roof access.”

“They really didn’t make this easy, did they,” Ishikawa noted, running through possible contingency plans and scenarios in his mind. “But for a prosthetics company to have an internal Net capable of disconnecting from the rest of the world, they sure sound paranoid about something.”

“It could possibly a contingency plan to prevent hacking and loss of intellectual property,” Proto suggested quietly.
“Whatever the case may be,” Aramaki continued, “we need access to the building. The prime minister received a ransom note saying that if their demands were not met, they would start killing off the cyberized workers one by one at exactly 3pm, an hour from now.”

“And what exactly are these demands?” Togusa inquired.

“They demand that CEO Kotobuki be put on the news of Channel 33 to denounce the benefits of prosthetics. They seem to believe that there is some alternative, untested method that is superior, but what exactly it is, is currently unclear.” Aramaki shook his head a bit.

“What a load of bull,” Batou scoffed. “That’s barely even a ransom. The hell are these people doing?”

“They could easily saturate the Net with this information,” Ishikawa pointed out, leaning forward on the desk. “But it’s unlikely that anyone would believe it without some credible source to back it up. I’m guessing it’s about legitimacy.”

“We can debate their reasonings later,” Togusa quieted the gathered agents. “Right now, we have the lives of the building’s workers at stake here.” He glanced up at Motoko, who hadn’t said anything since the briefing began. She simply stood there, listening to the conversation. He wasn’t sure if she wanted lead back or to simply take part in operations. No one could quite replace the Major and her ability to lead, even as much as he’d tried over the past three years.

But he knew the Major was hardly one to sit back and observe. She was often the one who did the extra work, diving in ahead literally and cybernetically. Her tactical knowledge was unparalleled. But she’d also been away for three years, likely unfamiliar with the new recruits since she’d left.

She had finally moved, offering Togusa a nod, leaving him to organize the teams.

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The two Section 9 helicopters circled around the Kotobuki Prosthetics building. The streets nearby were blocked off, no media or even police in sight. As the intel had noted, the police had evacuated the area when the ransom note had arrived at the Prime Minister’s office.

Borma peered out the helicopter door as it landed, observing the area and watching the second
helicopter fly towards the roof. “You’d think a paranoid company would have cyborgs marching around, defending the place.”

“I would reason even as a preventative measure, there would be some manner of cyborg defenses, Mr. Borma,” Proto countered politely. “However, it is possible they were disabled.”

“Or they only show up when you get close to the access door,” Paz pointed out, flicking the cigarette out the helicopter door. “Never reveal the power until someone gets close to the prize.”

“Ishikawa, Mori,” Borma called out over the cybercom. “Any word on what sort of resistance we’ll find here?”

“Nothing yet,” Ishikawa replied. “Just the workings of the system.”

“Can’t really rule out the possibility that the company’s modified the security beyond the original design, I’d say,” Mori chimed in. She was a newer member of the team, a hacker who had been sitting next to Proto during the briefing and idolizing Motoko since she’d walked in. “You never know when cyborgs might just pop out of the wall.”

Togusa frowned. There were times when he pondered if Mori took her job seriously, but she was good at what she did and always contributed to the team. “We’ll simply proceed with caution. Until we return, see if you two can chain together the information that’s been leaking onto the Net all day. It can’t be random.”

“Roger that,” the two hackers replied in unison.

Togusa motioned for the team to follow, hopping off the helicopter and approaching the building. The area was suspiciously clear and devoid of any movement. The journey to the access door was rather simple, the team rounding the side of the building and behind a hedge wall with ease.

The team had been cautious, even approaching using thermoptic camouflage to hide their arrival from whomever inside may be watching. The helicopters could easily have signaled Section 9’s arrival but with the lockdown in place, their only clues that a team had approached would’ve been through the camera surveillance system. The building itself was barricaded in, blast doors now covering all the windows and doors.
As they reached the access door, they dropped the camouflage, now out of sight of anyone from within the building. But as Togusa reached for the door, it began to move. He had almost doubted his eyes for a moment, staring as the team backed up towards the bushes and away from the moving wall.

The wall formed into something more recognizable, a pair of arms and legs, a shape for a head and a body. What seemed like cement bent and curved. Mori was close to right. The defensive cyborgs didn’t come out of the wall. They were the wall.
Chapter Summary

As Section 9 infiltrates Kotobuki Prosthetics, the teams find that there's something off about this situation. The people seem off, the situation seems off, and there's cyborgs popping out of the walls. Just who has taken over Kotobuki Prosthetics?

Motoko glanced at her wristwatch peeking out from underneath her sleeve. She had kept it, even after all these years, the timepiece faithfully ticking away. 45 minutes until the invaders began the execution of the cybernetically-enhanced workers. They had plenty of time, to infiltrate, subdue the assailants, and rescue the workers before 3pm. The challenge before them was the blast doors now blocking every potential entrance and exit into the building.

Her team was small and only half familiar. With her was Saitou, Azuma, and two recruits. She reviewed the files Togusa had forwarded her before they departed from headquarters.

Sasami Daimon. 35, 168cm, 60% prosthetic.

Recruited from Section 1 under a year ago, served as a special investigations field agent after serving in the military. Specialties include close-range combat and tactics.

Section 1 served as a special investigations force into serious criminal affairs. Daimon was rather built and definitely fit for the job of pursuing criminals in the field. Her height seemed a natural attribute, not something enhanced by partial cyberization, her long blond hair curled into something akin of a braided crown. She focused on the roof access door with her bright orange eyes, waiting silently for it to open.

Kasumi Mori. 33, 152cm, 40% prosthetic.

Recruited from Section 1 under a year ago along with Daimon, previously served as cyber crimes investigator. Rumored to have been a black hat hacker prior. No military experience. Specialties include hacking, cyber infiltration, and darkNet diving.

Mori had remained behind at headquarters with Ishikawa to attempt to pick apart the clues leaked onto the Net as soon as Kotobuki went offline this morning. Motoko had noticed her in the back, sitting next to Proto practically with stars in her eyes.
The darkNet was nothing short of a complicated labyrinth. It was the darkest, most unscrupulous part of the Net that always seemed to be scheming something and stealing data. To be able to navigate within that network, Mori had to be skilled and likely was a black hat hacker at one point.

Rei Aozora, 30, 167cm, 0% prosthetic.

Motoko paused in reading the file. No prosthetics was rather unusual in Section 9. She stared at the man crouched nearby on the roof, busying himself with some sort of cellphone game. He had shoulder-length dark hair that perpetually looked like he just rolled out of bed but otherwise looked completely unremarkable. He stood out mostly for his unusual and rare surname.

Recruited from Section 2 under a year ago, previously serving as a field agent and investigator. Jack of all trades.

Section 2 hardly seemed like a place to find recruits for Section 9. Section 2 served under the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, handling patent enforcement concerning biomedical advancements and investigations into illegal experimentation. Motoko couldn’t see much of Section 2 doing anything close to what Section 9 did on a regular basis, but to be here as a field agent, Aozora had to be something special.

Aozora peered up from his game. “I hope the other team hasn’t run into any trouble.”

But as soon as Aozora had spoken, sounds of gunfire and crashing rang out from the ground below. “You just had to open your damn mouth, Aozora,” Batou fussed.

“Togusa!” Motoko called out over the cybercoms. “What’s going on down there?”

“Just some cyborg enforcers,” Togusa replied, adding in person, “that come out of the wall. Where does Mori get these ideas that end up being right?”

“Nothing we can’t handle,” Borma added. Pulling out his gun. While he preferred large, heavy artillery, repeated shots from an automatic into the joint of a wall-emerging cyborg would equally do the trick.

Paz snuck behind, taking his knife and driving it into the back of the cyborg’s neck, attempting to sever any circuits he could reach. The combined efforts of the four at the access door took the
“Well that was a bit disappointing,” Paz noted, reaching into his pocket for a fresh cigarette.

Proto inspected the crumpled form of the cyborg. No noticeable ports, nothing to permit him to hack into whatever security system spawned the cyborg or to understand the numbers. It seemed rather odd to have such a small defensive line at the door, but the door itself wasn’t overtly easy to find either. As Togusa reached for the next door, Proto was prepared to fight another wall cyborg, but found that it was a regular door. And with the access codes Aramaki had retrieved from the company building the internal network, the door opened without resistance.

Motoko glanced at her wristwatch again. Only a minute had passed since the sounds of gunfire had quieted. Batou had taken to smoking, while Daimon stood patiently, folding her arms as she cautiously watched the door. Aozora busied himself with some cellphone game, the sound effects whispering into the silence. Azuma had taken to keeping a watchful eye toward the skies, either watching for possible counterattacks or just looking at the clouds impatiently.

“Major,” Proto spoke politely over the cybercoms. “I have taken control of the security system and internal network.” It had taken him longer than usual as he attempted to counter the static that seemingly flooded the internal Net. He couldn’t quite pinpoint its origins or why it was there, simply that it was. However, as a precaution, he kept his own intergates locked within his mind in an attempt to protect himself from any potential back-hacking as he dove into the system.

“I have control of the surveillance systems as well,” Proto added. “Many of the workers have been corralled on floor 40, but the president is held on floor 42. Unlocking the roof doors. I am working to unlock a lower floor to handle the remaining assailants on the lower floors.”

“Good work, Proto,” Motoko complimented as the blast door rolled up, revealing the regular roof access door. “Tachikoma, assist Proto in whatever he needs.”

“Roger, Major!” one of the Tachikoma replied excitedly.

“Proto,” she added “I need a report on what artillery these people have.”

“Mostly handguns and a few semi-automatics,” Proto replied, searching the feeds as he worked to unlock the entryway doors. “But there is something on floor 42, a strange box wired to a control panel and possibly to the internal system. It does not belong, Major. Something about it bothers
me, as if it’s the source of the static I am hearing in the Net.” He sent her an image of what he saw, of the box and of the people who had taken over the building.

“Oh, then we need to retrieve that box,” Motoko agreed. Static in a Net sounded very unusual unless that box was somehow attempting to jam or alter a signal. It wouldn’t be the first time they’d encountered jamming, though that last time was done with a plane. This was a box. But if experience told her anything, boxes could be many things including a cyberbrain wired into a system, a storage box, even a means to relay certain information.

Motoko relayed the images Proto had sent her of the floors and of the box. “Take down only the assailants. No civilian casualties.”

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“Really, Major, riding the elevator down to floor 40?” Batou scoffed over a personal cybercom link.

“It’s a classic,” Motoko countered. “And the assailants don’t exactly look all too bright.”

She’d looked over the visual for the assailants. Despite their numbers and the guns they toted, not a single one looked like they had any combat experience or even looked like they were even focused on reality. Something about the visuals felt off, and she had to see for herself.

She had divvied up the groups in a manner that surprised Aozora and Daimon, but not the other two. She and Batou took the greater number of assailants and hostages on floor 40 while the other three took to floor 42, where the CEO and the mysterious box were.

Batou understood the reasoning. He and Motoko had the most experience, and he highly doubted she’d become rusty in the last year. She reveled in action and likely had missed it. He understood her reasoning for leaving, her desire to sort things out after the case of the Individual 11. She had something with Kuze, but he’d never asked about it. Didn’t seem like his business.

“Yeah what was with that?” Batou frowned as the elevator dinged open at 43. Activating his thermoptic camouflage, he peered out the elevator and down the hall. Empty. It looked like the place hadn’t even been touched. He ducked back in. “All clear.”
The two teams left the elevator camouflaged, heading in opposite directions to opposite staircases while sending the elevator down to floor 40 as a decoy.

“*There’s something fishy about this, Batou,*” Motoko agreed as the pair slipped down the staircase quietly towards floor 40. “*That dazed look the assailants have, that box, that odd static Proto is hearing in the system. Something isn’t right.*”

“*You can say that again,*” Batou agreed, cracking open the door. The assailants were distracted by the elevator. Any sounds of the door were drowned out by the sounds of the assailants emptying their clips into the decoy elevator.

The pair approached the closest assailant and Motoko got a good look at him before smacking him in the back of the head with the butt of her gun. For a moment she’d thought perhaps the assailants were cyborgs, but this guy looked completely flesh. “*No ports. Is this guy completely without prosthetics? He’s not even wearing a bulletproof vest.*”

“*How the hell did these people take over this place if they can’t even remember to wear that?*” Batou scoffed, diving for cover against the wall as two of the assailants opened fire down the hallway. They shot directly at the fallen assailant, filling him with holes without even a concern for his life. “*Who the hell are these people!?!*”

From her position in the hallway, Motoko got a clearer view of the situation. Just as before, the office workers were corralled into a corner, while the assailants stood at a distance. These people really didn’t know tactics. Just who were they? “*I’ll draw their fire.*”

He already knew what her plan was. Drawing their attention as they emptied whatever was left in their clips as he took them out. Certainly wasn’t the safest of ideas, but hers never were. She was up to something or had noticed something even more out of the ordinary than this situation already was.

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Proto had stayed with Borma in the small side room as the rest of the team headed towards the front door. While he had taken control of the system, that static still bugged him. He attempted to sort through the sounds while the teams inside the building lead the assault, but so far, it seemed like the equivalent of incoherent babbling. Constant random noise as if someone or something were attempting to interfere with the system.
He watched the action but mostly he was focused on floor 42, where Aozora had reached the box. As he placed his hands on the box, Proto heard a severe feedback in the system, a high-pitched whine, then words. Eyes wide in surprise, he quickly yanked the cords from the back of his neck, grabbing at his head.

“Proto!” Borma exclaimed in surprise.

“I suppose this is a headache,” Proto rubbed at his head. He knew what they were but he wasn’t even certain he was capable of having them. “I could’ve sworn, right before that noise, I heard something say ‘We are the Collective. You cannot stop us’.”

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“The hell is going on?!” Batou shouted. He stood in the middle of the room, his gun poised to fire. He hadn’t shot a single bullet yet every assailant had simply fell dead before them.

Motoko approached, turning one over and feeling for a pulse. “They’re all dead.”

“So they just up and die when we get here?!” Batou fussed some more. “The hell are these people?”

“All the assailants just dropped dead suddenly,” Togusa noted over the cybercoms.

“Ours, too,” the Major confirmed.

“They all stopped when Aozora pulled that box,” Daimon added.

“There really is something going on here,” the Major noted aloud, mostly to herself but partly to Batou. She noticed it before, when she attempted to draw their fire, when she looked at the feeds Proto had given her. Something was controlling them and that box was somehow connected. “But what is it?”
Chapter Summary

After the siege of Kotobuki Prosthetics came to a rather sudden end, the team scours the Net for clues to the assailants and the origins of one name: Mikami.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“All of this fuss somehow connected to this mysterious box.” The chief sat at his office desk, staring at the disconnected chunk of metal sitting on the table. The most senior members of Section 9 sat at the couches surrounding the table.

Motoko picked up the metal box, turning it over in her hands. The box had been pried open, whatever inside had been removed and sent off for analysis. “The Collective Conscious,” she read from the bottom.

“Second time we’ve seen that pop up.” Borma noted. “Proto mentioned hearing the Collective before he got that headache and yanked the cords.”

“I didn’t even think Proto was capable of having headaches, though he is partially biological” Togusa noted, watching the Major inspect the box. “Everything about this is strange, right down to the assailants. They didn’t seem anywhere near the terrorist angle we were hearing.”

“They weren’t even cyberized,” Motoko noted. “Perhaps why they desired to force the CEO to publicly denounce the benefits of cybernetics.”

“What a load of bull,” Batou scoffed, leaning back on the couch. “The hell is this alternative they have anyway?”

“Mori and I dug up some threatening emails,” Ishikawa brought them up on the wall-sized screen, “though only one seems to mention an alternative cyberization process.” He brought forward the email in question. “And the only one which is signed.” The bottom of the email had a single name,見神.
“Mikami,” Borma read the name. “If the past is any indication, that name probably isn’t anything direct, just like with the logo of the Individual 11. The way it’s written, it means ‘mindset of god’, though it isn’t exactly an uncommon surname.”

“So, what, some idiot thinks he’s playing god?” Batou frowned. “That’s hardly new.”

Togusa skimmed the email, pondering the name. “Have you found the origin of these letters?”

Ishikawa shook his head. “Not yet. I have the Tachikoma tracing the route, but as some of the letters are older, the routes have been closed. They’re following the most recent one, the one signed by Mikami.”

“See what you all can find about Mikami, these letters, and this Collective,” Aramaki ordered. “Togusa, with me. Let’s see what we can learn from the CEO.”

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The Kotobuki Prosthetics building was hardly bustling, despite being in the middle of work hours. Most of the employees had been sent home after the attack on the building the day before, only the backbone of the company had remained with a tightened security detail.

“We appreciate you taking the time on such short notice to meet with us, Mr. Kotobuki,” Aramaki thanked the CEO as he and Togusa entered his office.

“Anything to help out those who freed us from those weirdos,” the CEO motioned for the two to sit. He was an older man, heavy set with thinning hair. He wore a crisp suit and wireframe glasses. “You mentioned wanting to know more about any threats against my company?”

Aramaki nodded. “Any information can be helpful.”

“The threats started coming a few months ago,” the CEO started. “I thought it coincidence but I’m honestly not sure. I had been reading about a new form of prosthetics, potential competition. They called it biothetics, biological prosthetics, but the health administration had disapproved any patents concerning them.”
“I remember hearing about that,” Togusa noted. “Those prosthetics that were literally grown.”

“Those are the ones,” the CEO nodded. “Word from business partners had it that the biothetics were too risky, that there was a greater chance of rejection than cybernetic prosthetics.”

“**Ishikawa,**” Aramaki called over the cyberlink, “see what you can dig up on a case a few months ago involving biothetics, particularly connecting it with the Department of Health.”

“**Roger that,**” Ishikawa replied. “You heard him, let’s start digging.”

Ishikawa, Borma, and Mori had gathered in the small, darkly lit room with terminals and viewfinders for diving into the Net. Compared to the other two, Mori was tiny, her long dark green hair pulled back into a thick braid as she worked.

“You know,” she noted aloud, “I’m pretty sure I’ve heard that name before, biothetics. The darkNet practically lit up with it.” The darkNet wasn’t exactly new. It had been around for years, serving as a place where the darkest of humanity liked to prowl. Underground markets, black market deals, chatter of the illegal kind. She was oddly familiar with it, even seemed to have connections to it and people linked to it. “Pre-emptive sales that seemingly disappeared overnight.”

“Not really surprising it disappeared,” Ishikawa noted, bringing up documentation on his screen. “Looks like Section 2 shut the manufacturing down just over a year ago. Says here these biothetics weren’t necessarily the problem, but it was how they were doing it. They required farms to grow these. Farms of people.”

Mori shuddered. “That’s even too apocalyptic for me, I’d say. Did they really grow these prosthetics on people?”

“Same old motive, isn’t it? Using people like farm animals to achieve their goals,” Motoko commented, leaning against the doorframe. She glanced at the counter next to Mori. “That’s not your lunch, is it?” she asked, indicating the metal tray sitting next to Mori’s keyboard. On the tray was a rather odd lump of something that looked more like burnt flesh, poked with wires and electrodes connecting it to the computer.

Mori turned, getting a clear view of Motoko’s thigh showing underneath her bodysuit and her thigh-high socks. She had a huge crush on the Major almost to the point of idolatry, making concentration rather difficult at the moment. She’d followed Motoko’s cases in the Section 9 database, hoping to one day meet this legendary Major she’d heard and read so much about.
Focus focus focus, she berated herself. “It’s the thing that was in the box at the Kotobuki building. Pretty weird, I’d say. It’s completely fried, but now with the mention of biothetics, I’m wondering if this thing really is just what it looks like: a biological fried flesh computer.”

Ishikawa frowned at the description. “It is possible. According to the Section 2 report not released to the public, the company responsible was experimenting on people to grow these prosthetics. The people rescued weren’t in great shape due to the amount of stress, some even had to be fully cyberized following the ordeal, though most did not survive more than a day after being rescued.”

“The media did release a report saying that the company responsible was using human experimentation,” Borma added, indicating a news article on his screen. “But not much more than that.”

“Not even the black markets would touch that, I’d say,” Mori noted. “Explains why much of the chatter about it just suddenly disappeared.”

“The Section 2 report continues to say that the CEO of the company, simply labeled Mi, was never found,” Ishikawa continued. “Something about that name is a bit unsettling, almost as if there are gaps in the actual report.”

“That is a bit suspect. I wonder,” Motoko leaned on the back of Ishikawa’s chair. “Could that Mi be the Mikami from the threatening letters.”

“It’s possible,” Ishikawa shrugged. “I’ll have to dig for any record of a Mi, but it’s just one single character, not even a surname.” He paused mid thought as a Tachikoma arrived on screen with some letters. “What have you found?”

The Tachikoma waved several files in its hand. “I found several patent submissions for biothetics listed after the date you specified, Mr. Ishikawa.” It brought the patents on screen, each one signed with a different, seemingly random kanji. With each patent, there were schematics, sketches, and scientific information linked to biothetic information. “None of them mention the human experimentation, but regardless each one was turned down.”

Mori peered over, attempting to focus on the screen and not the Major’s backside. “Department was probably paranoid that it’d happen again.”
“Departments aren’t exactly known for their high moral standards,” Motoko scoffed, “though under Prime Minister Kayabuki, they have gotten better.”

Another Tachikoma appeared on screen nearly in a panic. “Mr. Ishikawa! I just intercepted an email to Mr. Kotobuki!” It brought the email on screen. “‘We are the Collective. Our stance will be heard’ it says. I can’t trace the source. It just seemed to appear out of nowhere!”

“I’ll dive in,” Motoko jumped into action, pulling connector cables from the console. “We’ll use our infiltration protocol to trace the origins.”

“Major,” Aramaki chimed in over the cybercoms. “I just received a troubling call from the Prime Minister. While I’m looking into this troubling email here at Kotobuki, I need you to go in my stead. Take Proto or Mori or both of them with you.”

“Roger that, Chief.” Motoko paused with the wires in hand. “I’ll leave the tracing to you, Ishikawa. Mori, go get Proto and meet me in the car in 5.”

Chapter End Notes

Someone’s got a crush on the Maaajoooor. Then again, who doesn’t?

The darkNet featured here is based off the dark web, an actual real hidden internet that exists today.
A natural enemy - BIOLOGICAL

Chapter Summary

Motoko, Proto, and Mori head to the Prime Minster's office to investigate a mysterious box. But what could the box actually mean? Was the Collective already there?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mori could barely believe she was riding in the car with her idol. She stared at the back of Motoko’s head from the backseat as she and Proto spoke, filling him in on the current information.

“Human experimentation? To grow biological computer components?” Proto knit his brow in worry. He knew where he came from, who had made him, even his own purpose in life, but he’d never thought about how his biological components were made. Yet the more he thought about it, the more he became worried that his components were created on the pain of others.

“Some people simply don’t value life,” Motoko frowned, rounding the corner towards the government building to meet the Prime Minister. She glanced over at Proto, noticing his demeanor become terribly worried. “Is this case bothering you? You’re welcome to wait in the car.”

He shook his head, attempting to focus back on the road. “It is hardly that at all, Major.” He paused a moment, contemplating a personal conversation. He rarely held one. “However, Major, do you believe the Chief would ever approve a project that would go to such lengths? Even if it would benefit the team?”

Motoko hadn’t expected such a question. She had more expected the subject matter to be a bit unsettling, but it seemed to have struck a chord with him in a different way. She didn’t know much about him, his origins, why he was with Section 9, just that he’d become part of the team and eventually a field agent in his own right. Sure, he was a bioroid, but he was still just as much a part of the team as any of the agents and even the Tachikoma. “There is absolutely no doubt in my mind the Chief would never approve such projects.”

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Motoko’s words had put Proto’s concerns quickly to rest, and he entered the Prime Minister’s office with the other two. Kayabuki sat at her desk, her hands knit over her forehead as she leaned
over her desk in worry.

“Major,” she looked up as the trio entered the room. “It’s good to see you again, despite the circumstances.”

“Likewise,” she agreed, approaching with the other two. “The Chief said you had received something troubling?”

Kayabuki reached into her desk, pulling out a small box from one of the drawers, then setting it down on the desk. “I found this on my desk when returning from a meeting. It’s not postmarked or even written with an address.” She pulled the metal box from inside the mailing box, setting it down and scooting it towards the Major. “The box isn’t as troubling as how it got here, through security.”

“That box looks just like the one retrieved from the Kotobuki building, I’d say,” Mori remarked, peering at the box on the table.

“Have you opened it yet, Prime Minister?” Motoko inquired, picking the box up off the desk. It was solid metal but unlike the Kotobuki box, it had no visible wires, just several ports.

“I haven’t,” she shook her head, “but the writing on the bottom sounded like something related to the Kotobuki incident yesterday.”

Turning it over in her hands, she saw the inscription. “‘Cybernetics will fall. We are the Collective and we will have what we want.’ This Collective sure has been busy.” It was becoming clearer and clearer why Aramaki suggested bringing both Mori and Proto. This mysterious box didn’t arrive on its own, but it had managed to pass security with ease. Those two could investigate into the security systems with ease while Motoko handled the more diplomatic conversations. “Prime Minister, we’ll need to tap into your surveillance system.”

“Please do whatever is necessary,” Kayabuki nodded, standing up from her desk. “There is an access panel underneath the desk, like before.” She turned back to the Major. “Do we have another terrorist group on our hands?”

“We’re not quite sure yet,” Motoko replied. She handed the box to Mori for investigation, motioning for Proto to handle the surveillance investigations. He had prior experience with the system and likely could interpret the visual data much more quickly than Mori could. “We are still
Proto knelt down, taking a cord from his neck to the access panel, linking with it like before. The system was familiar and easy to sort through, his mind processing the multiple video feeds quickly, attempting to trace backwards the location of the box from the office. He found the culprit quickly, a rather unremarkable man in a repair worker’s attire, no signs of cyberized ports on the back of the neck. He held his head low, his gait rather awkward but his steps still somehow steady.

The man was holding a rather unremarkable bag, something typical of a repairman. There appeared to be a logo on one side, but no matter which view Proto tried to access, the logo simply wasn’t visible. He’d positioned the bag so that the logo was facing his leg, obscuring it from view.

With the images flowing backwards, he traced the man’s path, first backward down the hall. The box was well hidden in his bag full of tools; none of the office workers seemed to pay him much mind. He looked like a simple repairman.

Backwards he went, down the hallway and into the elevator and back out on the lower floor. There he was turned away by a security guard, forbidden to access whatever was on the floor. While the video feed continued to play in reverse, Proto accessed the schematics of the building, determining the layout. “Major, I have found something important.”

Motoko paused in her conversation about prosthetics and biothetics cases to speak with Proto instead. She watched the clip of the repairman that Proto had forwarded to her. “A repairman with no distinct markings, appears to not be cyberized. He was initially heading for the floor containing the servers but was misdirected. Perhaps he intended to use the box here.”

Kayabuki drew a hand to her forehead. “All our repairmen are androids here,” the Prime Minister noted. “What would this person be looking for here?”

“The access panel, likely,” Proto replied, pulling the connectors from the back of his neck and replacing the panel on the floor. “It is possible he simply could not find it.”

“What were they even trying to do here?” Kayabuki found herself increasingly worried. Could this be another Individual 11? Was her life threatened again? Really she didn’t sign up for this. She wanted to help fix the corruption, not be the target of attacks once again.

“We’re not completely sure yet, Prime Minister,” Motoko replied. She wasn’t the best assuaging
fears, but she’d seen a lot of corruption in her time with Section 9 and even outside it. People resorted to wild measures just to prove they were right. The Laughing Man, Kuze, Gouda, this case surely would be another to rank up there with the extreme. Hopefully this one wouldn’t turn into an all-out militarized war.

“Chief,” she called out over the cybercoms, forwarding him the video from Proto. “This man had delivered another box like the one found in the Kotobuki building. See if their surveillance has turned up anyone similar. And the Prime Minister might need a bit of a guard. She seems to attract the trouble.”

“I’ll send Daimon, Aozora and Batou over for the detailing,” Aramaki replied.

“Batou will so love protection detail,” Motoko commented.

“Those three are the best for a detail job,” Aramaki added. “I need the rest of you continue the investigation. See to it that you find all you can about this new box and the mysterious repairman.”

“Roger that,” Motoko replied to Aramaki before speaking across the comms again. “Ishikawa, Borma, I need you two to learn what you can about this repairman.” She forwarded a copy of the video to the two.

“You got it, Major,” Ishikawa replied.

“The chief is sending over Daimon, Aozora, and Batou for protection,” Motoko informed Kayabuki. “I suggest you tighten security for now, inspect every box that enters this building.”

Kayabuki nodded. “I really thought for once we could have some respite for awhile.”

“We can always hope,” Motoko agreed. Respite would be nice, but it wasn’t necessarily her thing. She’d rather be the one to create a respite after intercepting dangers, corruptions, and troubles. “For now, we-----”

Motoko’s words were quickly cut off by a rather loud yelp followed by the clattering of the box to the floor. Mori had practically leapt on the couch, dropping the box in the process. “Hooly crap. There’s a finger in that box. A freaking finger! The hell is wrong with this Collective?!”
Poor Kayabuki just wants to do her job, not get deliveries of fingers in a metal box and weird repairmen, but such is the life of the Prime Minister.
Chapter Summary

With the finger retrieved from the Prime Minister's office, Section 9 investigates into a mysterious company named Ogami Biothetics and a possible Section 2 cover up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So she really jumped on the couch and started screaming.” Ishikawa stifled a laugh.

“That’s right,” Motoko nodded, offering Mori a coy grin, which only seemed to rile the girl up even more.

“It’s not funny!” Mori shouted defensively, running a hand through her hair and fiddling with her headband.

“But it is,” Ishikawa protested. “You practically live in the darkNet and you’re afraid of a finger.”

She puffed up, jabbing a finger at him. “Look, I’ve been watching way too many yakuza movies lately, I’d say.”

“Prosthetics made that practice obsolete,” Paz pointed out.

Mori frowned sharply. “How was I supposed to know that it was just a biothetic chip and not a real finger?!” It had been truly surprising for everyone in the Prime Minister’s office. The team had seen the fried version of the chip in the Kotobuki box, but this one hadn’t been fried and for whatever reason, looked just like a human finger.

“Have you found anything interesting on that chip or the mysterious repairman?” Motoko returned to the subject at hand.

“The same uniform was spotted in the Kotobuki building,” Togusa added as he and Aramaki entered the room.
“Mori’s still working on the chip,” Ishikawa replied, returning to the conversation as well. He’d just have to give Mori a hard time about the finger later. “But as for the uniform, it’s pretty run-of-the-mill standard. The guy never actually looks up, so no good images on the face. However, I found a logo on his bag, and it matched the repairman’s bag from the Kotobuki building as well.”

He spun on his chair, bringing up a large image of the logo on screen. The logo itself was simple, several kanji next to a hand that had one finger extended and pointing.

“That really looks like an old school game menu pointer, I’d say,” Mori commented, leaning over towards the screen in her chair.

“Rather amusing that the chips found in the boxes also resemble fingers,” Ishikawa added, receiving a rather sharp glare from Mori.

“‘Ogami,’” Togusa read the kanji. “Why does that sound familiar?”

“I did some digging,” Ishikawa replied. “Ogami Biologics was the company responsible for the biothetics grown from humans. After the scandal of human experimentation was exposed on the media, Ogami went out of business practically the next day, building was raided and shut down, their research buried somewhere likely in Section 2’s databases. Scary thing is, it seems that Ogami was doing this human experimentation long before they were actually caught.”

“That is rather unsettling,” Proto commented.

“It is,” Ishikawa agreed. “What’s even stranger is that the original approval permits for biological research seem to have disappeared.”

“Documentation simply doesn’t disappear,” Aramaki frowned.

“It doesn’t,” Ishikawa agreed. “We’re still digging into the health department’s databases to track down any permits and certifications this company had to file. I have found reports of Section 2 doing routine visits and approvals, but I get the sinking suspicion that someone in Section 2 may have been covering for the company. It’s like the report on the raid. Something about it feels doctored.”
“Probably paid to look the other way,” Paz commented. “Probably also bailed when it looked like
the company’s practices would be caught. Or perhaps that the mole wanted more money.”

“Hard to say just yet,” Ishikawa agreed, “but something’s fishy here.”

“The corruption never ceases, does it?” Motoko added

“It’s all definitely linked here, somehow,” Borma noted. “Our only link between the biothetics
scandal and the Collective is that repairman and his mysterious boxes, and those boxes bother me
the most. The static Proto was hearing from the Kotobuki building, how the assailants looked
lifeless. As far as I know, a non-cyberized person cannot be controlled in such a way.”

“Zombies,” Mori interjected.

“I wonder,” Motoko tilted her head just a bit as she stared at the logo on the screen, “if you’re not
that far off. What if these people have these biothetics? What do we know about them? Are they
controllable?”

“Wait, Major,” Togusa stared at her in surprise, “are you suggesting these people actually are
cyberized but with these biological components?”

“We’ve seen this before, Togusa,” Motoko nodded, “with the Laughing Man case. He could fool
anyone with cyberized components but the few non-cyberized people actually had seen him. Even
wizard-level hackers can’t hack a fleshy, uncyberized body. There has to be something more there,
something with circuits but undetectable by our understanding of cyberization.”

Proto stared at the finger chip sitting in the box next to Mori’s keyboard. “The finger from the
Prime Minister’s office was rather believable. Blood vessels, muscles, and skin surrounding
cyberized components. For what we could determine at first, it did appear to be a real finger.”

“Could these biothetics really not require ports or cyberizing the brain?” Mori pondered aloud.

“I need you to find that out for me,” Aramaki ordered. “Search the databases and even the darkNet.
I’ll handle Section 2.”
“You just expect to waltz in here and get whatever you want, don’t you, Aramaki?”

“There’s really no need to be so hostile, Sekiguchi,” Aramaki attempted to calm the situation.

Sekiguchi was a hotheaded older man with a rather large gut and an even larger mouth. He had run Section 2 for decades, managing the various permits and cases involving biomedical experimentation, inventions, and research. He’d seen many cases in his time that would make most stomachs turn upside down from a grotesque abuse of human bodies, and the cases had truly only served to make him a rather stubborn, loudmouthed man. “How am I supposed to act when you waltz in here and start accusing me of losing permits!!”

“It was a statement,” Aramaki countered.

“And if a permit gets lost, it’s not Section 9’s problem!” Sekiguchi continued shouting. “It’s none of your damn business.”

“It is our business when it spills out into the Net and the real world,” Aramaki countered calmly. “And it is also our business when it involves threatening emails and a raid on a prominent prosthetics company.”

Sekiguchi scoffed. “Get the hell out of my office, Aramaki!”

Uncooperative as ever. Aramaki never knew Sekiguchi to be particularly willing to work with other agencies, though lately he’d distanced himself even more than usual. He was beginning to wonder if the Major was right, that there was a huge cover-up surrounding the biothetics permits and Ogami Biologics. “Major, proceed with the plan.”

“A wall with a big mouth again, I take it?” While Motoko had driven Aramaki to Section 2’s headquarters, she hadn’t actually arrived with him. Instead while Aramaki entered as normal, she’d slipped in unnoticed, camouflaged and hidden from cameras and sight with a small amount of equipment tucked into the pockets of her combat uniform.

“Always, though he was acting particularly defensive when I brought up the permits,” Aramaki added, pushing the button on the elevator as if nothing were out of the ordinary for him leaving.
“Possible conspiracy?” She slipped into one of the secured doors, following a routine security guard. For a government building, it was particularly easy to slip in and access the lower levels where the databases were housed.

“Possibly,” Aramaki replied, stepping into the elevator. “Though he has always been rather defensive when anyone calls him wrong. This seemed more than usual, as if he knew something was wrong and didn’t want to admit it. He hates being wrong.”

Motoko resisted scoffing as she slipped down the hallway towards the databases. “Figures, another bureaucrat with a big head.”

“The corruption never ceases, Major, I was hoping that at least the section chiefs would steer clear of it,” Aramaki admitted, stepping out of the elevator on the ground floor. “Wait five minutes, then dive in. Take everything you can surrounding the biothetics and leave. Don’t get caught.”

Motoko grinned as she slipped into the control room. “As if you have to tell me not to.”

Chapter End Notes

Sekiguchi is made of the characters for barrier and mouth. Traditionally it means barrier opening, like a gate, but here it could pretty much mean a wall with a big mouth.
Chapter Summary

With the suspicions of a cover-up in Section 2, Motoko dives into their database for some investigations. But instead of jumping in and out of the database, Motoko discovers something more intriguing than some missing biothetic files.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The system was surprisingly easy to bypass, but she didn’t exactly expect Section 2 to have the strongest of defenses. Section 2 handled cases involving biomedical experiments, patents, and approval and monitoring of inventions. They operated under the command of the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. They were hardly the sort to deal with high profile cases of cyberterrorism, crimes, or even espionage as some of the other sections did, though they did have their own field agents.

One of the newer field agents in Section 9 had originally served in Section 2, though Batou didn’t have the highest respect for the man. He’d complained Motoko’s ear off about Rei Aozora after she’d made the mistake of asking what he’d thought about the new team members that had joined during her hiatus. From what little Motoko had observed, Aozora did seem to do the bare minimum, but he did that minimum well. There had to be something more about him that lead the Chief to keep him on the team. Aramaki wasn’t the sort to keep slackers around.

But Motoko hadn’t temporarily disabled the people running the servers at Section 2 to snoop on her coworkers, though the temptation was there. Instead after securing the room, she propped herself up against the desk, a cord running from her neck to the mainframe directly. “I’m in. Distribute the disabling virus.”

“Roger that, Major!”

Motoko had brought with her two Tachikoma AIs. They were two of the group who had been working with her during the Solid State Society, the rest remaining back at headquarters to help dive into the Net to find answers. They had developed personalities which were adept at infiltration and pre-emptive measures to protect those with them as the person ghost dove into a system.

Motoko and the two Tachikoma dove into the system, the flow of data becoming visible around their small icons as they arrived at the first intergate. The virus Motoko had construction worked its magic, opening the gate faster than they could say ‘Open Sesame.’ Down into the system they
dove, no countermeasures in sight.

“*There, Major!*” the red Tachikoma indicated by pointing with the avatar’s arm. “*There’s the database. Look at all the connections to it!*”

“*So many streams of data,*” the yellow one noted. “*The database itself is just up ahead.*”

“*Good work, you two,*” she complimented. “*Monitor the system while I’m in there.*” Her avatar manifested within the database, the tight-suited persona she used when diving deep into a system. The database manifested as a library, one with extensive rows and books for the blocks of data.

Everything within the library was well organized, maintained by bot-like AI that whizzed past her down the aisles, retrieving and returning the books when queries called for information. The bots paid her no mind as she walked down the aisles, reading the labels.

“Interesting,” she noted. “A designer could choose any look for the inner workings of the database, and he chose something so old fashioned and classic.”

“*She, actually.*”

Motoko quickly spun around, finding a woman behind her. She was nearly the same height as Motoko, a long knee-length light blue dress with deep blue hair pulled back into a low ponytail. She adjusted her large, old fashioned glasses. “There is nothing wrong with the classics.”

Motoko looked the girl up and down. What an interesting choice for an avatar. “And you are?”

“Ami,” she replied. “I am the digital version of the designer and builder of the system. You?”

“*Major, should we disable her?*” the red Tachikoma asked with uncertainty.

“*Hold that idea for a moment.*” Motoko turned back to Ami. “Murasaki,” she replied, offering a false name.
“A false name,” Ami nodded, folding her hands together in front of her. “Well then, Murasaki, I must commend you for getting this far.”

This avatar was much more clever than Motoko had expected. She considered disabling the avatar right then and there, but the avatar’s intentions could be something other than attack. Ami could easily have attacked when Motoko’s back was turned. “Are you going to eject me now?”

She shook her head. “I considered it, being that you don’t belong here,” she replied. “However, you’ve shown no malice to the database, just that disabling virus running about in the external sectors of the system. And those AI units with you, they have me intrigued. You’re not just some ordinary wizard-level hacker, are you.”

“Seems you’ve caught me,” Motoko laughed. This ‘Ami’ was much smarter and more sophisticated than she’d first thought. She had heard of systems builders leaving a piece of their own self behind in the form of an AI, she simply never expected to meet one. “And you’re not just some AI either.”

“AI?” Ami scoffed. “Not at all. I am just a ghost in the machine.”

Motoko stared for a moment. “A ghost? And this database is your shell?”

“That’s right,” Ami nodded. “This is my home, a beautiful fusion of life and work, eternally running my creation.” She paused, as if there were more but didn’t want to speak to some hacker about her own troubles.

“There’s something wrong with the database, isn’t there?” Motoko asked, guessing. She continued when the ghost didn’t offer a reply. “My real name is Motoko. I work for Section 9. If there’s some means that my AI or I could help you...”

“Section 9….” Ami finally replied. “I’ve always wanted to fuse with that database, rumored to be the most advanced there is. My mentor built it.” She considered the possibility the avatar before her was lying, but Section 9 wasn’t exactly the most public of the sections. Even fused with a database, she knew this to be true. “There is, actually. Come with me.”

The ghost turned on her bare feet, heading down the large main aisle, several organizing AI bots passing by her. A table sat in the nearby aisle with an incomplete chess set on it. Chairs dotted the area as if she expected someone to visit.
Silently, she wove through a few aisles, Motoko following her closely as to not get lost. But getting lost was hardly a problem compared to what appeared before her. The shelves were noticeably missing, just a sea of emptiness left in its wake. “The missing biothetics files.”

Ami paused, staring back at Motoko. “How did you know?”

“Sekiguchi was quite insistent the files hadn’t gone missing,” Motoko replied, reaching forward to touch the gap.

“Sekiguchi. I hate that man.” Ami quickly pulled Motoko’s hand back as if touching the emptiness would harm her.

“Seems most do,” Motoko commented, withdrawing her hand from the gap.

“Files just don’t go missing here,” Ami continued. “I run a very tight security on the place. The AI is very strict about organizing. They aren’t missing. They were corrupted, purposely taken and destroyed. These are the only books that have been corrupted. This has never happened before.”

Motoko could see how upset Ami was about this. Ami was a ghost in the machine, much like Motoko herself, but the latter had chosen a human body of her liking instead of a database. But to each her own. “Tachikoma, see if there’s anything recoverable here.”

Motoko watched the little red Tachikoma avatar zipped about, observing the corrupted void as best it could. “Have there been any other visitors here? Or is it truly so lonely?”

“The AI are my friends,” Ami replied, completely content with being alone with her creations. “However there used to be someone who would come and visit every so often. He was one of the field agents here. He called himself Mikami.”

Motoko stared, wide-eyed at her. “Mikami?” There was no way it could be the selfsame one from the threatening letters, the one linked to the Collective. “What was he interested in when he came?”

“He was always asking about prosthetics and cyberization,” Ami replied. “Patents, permits,
Motoko paused, debating on telling her. But Ami wasn’t an AI, she was a ghost, formerly a living person now bonded with the machine. “Recently we’ve encountered an aggressive organization that has threatened a prosthetics company, though his threat to the Prime Minister was thwarted. The leader of this organization calls himself Mikami.”

Ami pursed her lips together. “It can’t be the same one. He seemed so sweet.”

“When did you last see him?” Motoko pressed for more information. “What was he looking for?”

Ami summoned the logfile before her, scrolling through the suspended information with her finger. “A week ago. He wanted information on Kotobuki Prosthetics.”

“I don’t believe it,” Motoko stared. “He’s been gathering all his information here for his attacks. We might be able to prevent them.”

“I can hardly believe that sweet Mikami has been using my information for malice!” Ami shouted. The idea angered her. He had always come by, promising to complete the chess set and challenge her for a game.

“Can you do me a favor then,” Motoko placed a hand on her shoulder. “Can you contact me with whatever information he accesses next time he’s here?”

The ghost stared at the hole in her database. The missing data appeared close to the last visit, but she still had trouble believing that Mikami was doing something malicious. “Do you think I bar him from the library? What is he doing with my precious information?”

Motoko shook her head. “If he suspects something, I don’t want him to harm you. It’s best to continue normally.”

Ami nodded, still staring at the void in the database. “Hey, Motoko?” She frowned as the Tachikoma came up with nothing, not even a speck of data remained of her precious files. “You
“Think if I help, I’d be able to get a transfer?”

“A transfer?” Motoko echoed in surprise.

She nodded. “I’ve always wanted to work with Section 9’s database. I fused myself with this database, thinking I could do some good with my work instead of dealing with my failing health, but really I just sit here and read and organize all day. Which is great, but I’m not doing any good with my work. I want to do what I never could with my failing body.”

Motoko could understand far too well. She’d lost her entire body in an accident, fully prosthetized so young. “Why weren’t you fully prosthetized?”

Ami frowned, looking down at the floor almost ashamed. “The doctors didn’t think I would make it, that the sickness would affect my brain and maybe even corrupt the new one. This was to be my very last database, so I made it my eternal home.”

Her reasoning struck the Major hard. Lately Motoko had been trying to find her purpose, and here was a ghost, trying to find the same thing. Motoko patted her on the shoulder before manifesting a small chip. “Here, this is a direct, private link. You can talk to me this way. I promise, I’ll speak to Chief Aramaki about a potential transfer.” It was a tragic story, one Motoko could easily sympathize with, and the girl certainly had potential to be a member of Section 9. The Tachikoma seemed to warm up to her quickly.

“But first,” Motoko emphasized, “we need to stop Mikami from harming more people.”

Chapter End Notes

I was always fascinated by the library concept you see briefly after the Laughing Man incident. It's modern with a sort of classical touch to it. It seemed like a good design for a librarian character who had fused herself with the database.

The idea that ghosts can take a non-cyborg shell is briefly touched upon when Section 9 discusses the possibility that the Tachikoma have become ghosts themselves. There’s also a brief nod in a side episode where a cyberbrain is still living within a box. So why couldn't someone fuse herself with the database? It's feasibly possible with how cyberization seems to work in this series.

And yes, Ami is a reference to Sailor Mercury.
Concerned for the Prime Minister's well being, Batou, Aozora, and Daimon stand watch at the town hall when a mysterious woman in red suddenly shows up. Could this be another of the Collective's attacks?

“Do you ever put that damn game down?”

“I’m just passing the time, Mr. Batou,” Aozora replied, not even bothering to look and seemingly more focused on the cellphone game in his hands.

Batou and Aozora stood outside the entrance to the assembly hall, the former more focused on the guard detail at hand. They were fortunate to have a female coworker with them, one which could stay closer to Kayabuki and not invade her privacy. Daimon was female, if not a particularly intimidating one, naturally standing tall and muscular. She could stick with the Prime Minister and not make it awkward.

The team of three had arrived dressed down in civilian clothes as to not draw any attention from potential Collective invasions. If they wanted to catch this repairman in action, they couldn’t look like police or military.

“Yeah, whatever,” Batou scoffed, pulling a bar of food from his jacket pocket.

“Our orders are to ‘act normal’,” Aozora reiterated.

“Act like normal people, not be oblivious to our surroundings,” Batou fussed.

“As if I didn’t notice the rather beautiful woman in red pass us just now,” Aozora observed, not even looking up from the game he was playing.

“Huh?” Batou spotted her, a woman in a red dress that stuck out against the drab suits and attire of
the people walking the halls. “The hell?”

“I am uncyberized, not unobservant, Mr. Batou.” Aozora continued to tap and swipe at his game.

“Yeah but did you notice that woman in red has a bag just like the repairmen from before?” Batou fussed. “Stay here, and put the damn game down!” He began tailing the woman at a brisk pace but not enough to gain her attention. “Daimon,” he called out over the cybercoms, “stick to the Prime Minister like glue. We got an Ogami bag sighting. ”

“Understood,” she replied over the com.

Batou mentally cursed at Aozora as he tailed the woman. The kid was new, but he wasn’t inexperienced. He’d come from Section 2 as a field agent, happy to get into a Section where the chief wasn’t breathing down his neck constantly. He had proven himself rather useful in various cases, his combat experience not as refined but still substantial. But lately, he seemed out of it, addicted to that cellphone game when the situation was at a lull.

Batou had come slightly more accepting of new recruits and fresh faces. Mori was eccentric, but she was incredibly smart. Daimon’s field expertise was always welcome. But Aozora seemed to be the slacker of the three, doing excellent work when he wasn’t actually paying attention to something else, particularly that annoying game.

As he tailed the woman through the crowd, he noticed something off. The woman had been cyberized and possessed the ports on the back of her neck. A decoy? He stepped forward, placing a hand on the woman’s shoulder. She nearly yelped in surprise.

“Where’d you get that bag?”

She stared at him, surprised, then stared down at the bag, also surprised. “Wait, this isn’t my handbag! Oh dear, that poor girl must’ve walked out with my handbag. I bet she’s missing her tools now. She looked like she was going to repair something! I must find lost and found.”

Batou frowned. “A woman in a repair jumpsuit? Blue?”

“Yes, how did you know?” she stared down at the bag then back up at Batou. “Have you seen her?”
“What did she look like?” Batou replied with another question.

“Matching cap, her hair tucked up in it, a strangely blank expression,” she described.

“I’m with public security, I need that bag,” Batou held his hand out. The woman immediately handed it off to him, scampering towards building security to help find her own missing handbag. He rummaged through the bag. Various tools for repairs and maintenance, no identification or wallet, and notably no box which had appeared in the previous two locations. There was a note however.

_Stopping the Collective isn’t possible. Better luck next time, jerk. :p_

Batou frowned sharply before crumpling up the note and throwing it back into the bag angrily. Smug ass Collective and their mocking emoji. He slung the bag over his shoulder, heading back towards the meeting room door. “ The damn bag’s a decoy ,” he fussed over the cybercoms. “ The Collective’s already here somewhere, toting some lady’s purse. Daimon, keep a sharp eye. ”

“ No sharp eye needed, Batou ,” Daimon replied over the coms sharply. “ They’re already here. Many of the reporters went glassy-eyed. I can handle this group. Camera stands can only do so much damage. ”

She stood strong on the stage, the Prime Minister behind her. The glassy-eyed reporters wielded camera stands and chairs, likely unable to bring guns into the assembly hall. Something about this attack bugged her. There was a decoy. How did the Collective even learn Section 9 was tracking repairmen with bags so quickly when they themselves just learned the information?

But first and foremost, she had to deal with these assailants with chairs. Could they be saved if Batou found another box and disconnected it or would they be lost like the first group?

“ Tachikoma ,” Batou called out over the cybercoms. “ I need you to hack into the assembly hall surveillance system and find a repairman and that box from the Kotobuki building! ”

“ Roger, Mr. Batou! ” the Tachikoma replied, immediately setting to work.
This was just wild. Just how many people were affected by this Collective technology? Had truly this many people been outfitted with these illegal biothetics which potentially were controllable by the Collective as suggested? Batou could hardly believe it when the Chief had relayed the information to the protection detail early yesterday. People with undetectable prosthetics controlled by a box that looked like it was from a bad scifi movie from the late 90s.

He ran past the entry door to the assembly hall where Daimon was, nearly shouting profanity as Aozora wasn’t standing at his post. “Aozora!” he shouted over the cybercoms. “Where the hell are you?! This isn’t break time.”

“It was better than whizzing on the floor,” Aozora retorted. “But I also spotted the repairman on the way out of the restroom. I’m tailing him now. Possibly her. Those are rather feminine shoes.”

Batou could never quite understand Aozora’s fortune, his laziness somehow always leading him to the culprit. When he actually applied himself, Aozora was a good field agent, just that game had recently stolen his attention to the point Batou wanted to break his phone. “Tail her. Find out what she’s up to.”

“Mr. Batou!” the Tachikoma exclaimed over a private cybercom with Batou. “I found it! The box is located on floor B1.”

“What’s located over there?” Batou skidded around the corner, heading down the hallway towards the stairs, the decoy bag still slung over his shoulder.

“An electrical room,” the Tachikoma replied. “That box is hooked into one of the panels in the wall. I think it’s responsible for a lot of static noise.”

Batou frowned sharply. Proto had reported the same noise at the Kotobuki building, but he’d also reported some extreme noise once the box was removed, something he described as the equivalent of a jet engine suddenly and unexpectedly firing off. These boxes also seemed to affect AI as well. He wasn’t certain if it affected cyberbrains the same way, but he wasn’t about to experiment and find out. “Record the noise for a moment then disconnect right away.”

“Roger that, Mr. Batou!” the Tachikoma replied happily.

Batou peeked out the stairwell door, his firearm in one hand, door in the other. The hallway was empty, not a sound apart from the water pipes clattering in the ceiling. He crept along, finding the room indicated by the Tachikoma. Also empty. The repairman had already left, likely with Aozora
now on her tail, and she had left no one behind to guard the box.

Batou inspected the wires. All this trouble over a stupid box connected to an access panel. It wasn’t even a computer panel, just one connected with the lights. Batou paused. The means to control the Collective, the glassy-eyed people, wasn’t through a computer broadcast but through the light system? Now that he thought about it, the box at Kotobuki was connected in the CEO’s office, as well, not at a server room.

He made a note of the information, yanking the cords.

“What in the world?” Prime Minister Kayabuki stood behind Daimon, who was now covered in various bruises and scratches from the assault. Daimon had made a rather effective wall, taking the brunt of the damage while the Prime Minister remained safe. “Did they… did they just drop dead?”

“Just like before,” Daimon stared almost in horror. She leapt off the stage, placing a finger on the neck of one of the reporters. “Dead.” She flipped the reporter over. No ports. The poor woman looked perfectly human, not a sign of prosthetics on her.

She flipped over another and another and another. Every single one of them were perfectly biological. Cybernetic and android reporters were commonplace in a public meeting like this. They had the capability of interfacing with their recording equipment better than those without cyber brains, though that didn’t mean there weren’t completely fleshy reporters still working in the business. The sheer number of uncyberized reporters was what stood out the most.

“Every single reporter here shows no signs of cybernetics and is now also dead,” Daimon reported over the cybercom. “This gives me a bad feeling. Was this some sort of suicide mission knowing we’d find the box? Or are they unwittingly forced into this?”

“The repairwoman is also dead,” Aozora reported.

Batou scowled. So many lives lost by this box now in his hands. What was the Collective trying to do, really?

Chapter End Notes

Honestly how could I resist a Matrix reference? I can't quite resist pissing off Batou
either. That emoji really got under his skin.

But now after the encounter, Section 9 seems to have more questions than answers as well as a room full of dead reporters. Oops.
Chapter Summary

Events are starting to cross paths. Suspicions arise. More questions than answers begin to surface. But one thread seems to connect them all: Mikami. Just who is he?

“A woman in a red dress, a note with emoji, and the Collective. Sounds fishy to me,” Ishikawa commented, leaning back in his chair as text poured over the screen. A few had gathered in the observation room, most paying attention to the conversation though Mori had preoccupied herself with something, her headgear down as she barely had moved.

“I don’t get it,” Togusa shook his head. “How did the Collective already know we were looking for bags and those suspicious boxes?” He thumbed at the new box now sitting next to Borma on the shelf.

“I don’t know,” Motoko leaned against the wall, folding her arms in thought. “Batou sent a copy of the note. He was fuming.”

“I can’t blame him,” Ishikawa admitted. “That note was mocking us and everything we were aiming to achieve.”

“And now we have a room full of dead reporters and one repairwoman,” Togusa sighed. “Any information on if the dead have any modifications?”

“Not yet,” Ishikawa shook his head. “The problem we’ve found is that the biothetic circuitry is biologically based and difficult to detect by normal means. The brains don’t even appear to be cyberized. I have Mori diving into the darkNet to find any patents that might be floating around.”

“I figured since she isn’t staring at my ass today,” Motoko commented.

“She’s not exactly inconspicuous when she does it,” Ishikawa remarked. “Anything good from the Section 2 database?”

“The biothetic files are mysteriously missing,” Motoko shook her head. “Though I encountered a
ghost maintaining the database.”

“A ghost?” Togusa echoed. “Maintaining a database?”

“That’s right,” Motoko nodded. “The creator of the database whose health had failed, so she merged herself with the machine.” She passed the images of the ghost onto the others gathered in the room.

“She looks like she’s from an anime,” Ishikawa noted.

“When you’re just a ghost, you can look however you want,” Motoko pointed out. “Her name’s Ami Midorikawa, a brilliant programmer with a debilitating degenerative disease.”

“And she didn’t just go full cyborg like you did?” Togusa questioned.

“According to medical files, her body rejected any attempt at cyberization,” Motoko explained. “She managed to merge herself with the code, maintaining the database like a literal library. For all intents and purposes, Ami’s cyborg body is the database.”

“What a lonely existence,” Togusa commented.

“Perhaps,” Motoko agreed. “She has only entertained one visitor other than me: Mikami.”

Ishikawa and Togusa both stared. Borma presumably stared as well.

“The same one,” Motoko continued. “He researched the files of Kotobuki Prosthetics right before the attack. I left a communication link with her in case Mikami makes a return.”

“This Mikami is clever,” Borma frowned. “Using false names, diving into highly secured databases, even erasing any of his digital footprints.”

“There were a few pop culture references to Mikami, but the one that stood out was reference to an anime series from the 2000s that involved a magical book, a Deathnote, that could kill people by
writing their name,” Ishikawa added. “In a way, it feels like that box is a literal death note for everyone lured into its clutches.”

“It does make me wonder, like Daimon and Batou had both suggested, how much of this is willing?” Togusa thought aloud. “Are they purposely going there on a suicide mission or are they being pulled in unwittingly?”

“I did find some interesting information regarding that,” Ishikawa added, passing some information along to those who gathered. “The press list from today. Or the one that was supposed to be the press list. I dredged up this copy from a handful of local news stations listing who was supposed to be assigned to the conference. The final list was altered before being handed off to the assembly hall’s security. These people were purposely sent there, and even stranger? Some of them aren’t actually press. They’re plants.”

“What is going on,” Togusa wondered aloud.

Motoko shifted a bit, refolding her arms as she pondered the situation. “Have you found any information on if Batou’s theories about the lights has any weight to it?”

“It’s an interesting theory,” Ishikawa admitted. “Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve heard of it. There was talk years ago about transmitting signals through lights. There was a large amount of research even about broadcasting WiFi signals through them. It’s feasible, but we haven’t been able to find anything just yet. Hopefully Mori’s dredging through the bowels of the darkNet will result in something.”

………..

It was loud, bright, and dark at the same time, looking like the red light district in the dead of night. Lights flashed in the darkness, drawing the most unscrupulous sort near. Mori barely stood out in the crowd, her avatar wearing a black catsuit with a long black trench coat. Her hair was fluorescent green, pulled back into a thick braid, mirroring the style she wore normally.

She’d reached it, the deepest part of the darkNet where the worst dwelled. Mori had been here, she was a familiar sight. Her questioning about any subject would go relatively unnoticed.

Aramaki knew of her past, of her record as a high-level hacker that once shut down the entire media network for an hour because it was fun. Motoko likely knew too given the Major’s abilities
to dive deep into the Net. She’d left traces under the pseudonym Jupiter just to see if anyone could trace it.

And now with the recent information, Motoko could possibly begin to suspect her as a snitch. Someone was feeding the Collective information, and Mori did have access to the deepest darkest regions of the Net. She’d heard about the decoy from Batou, she’d talked to Ishikawa about theories, she was suspicious and she knew she wasn’t the mole. Section 9 was the perfect place for her and her skills. She wouldn’t jeopardize this opportunity.

So that had lead her here to a library that looked like it belonged in the basement of an old mansion in a horror movie with some kind of futuristic glowing decorations. She didn’t expect to find anything about who the rat was, but she could at least learn of Mikami and the information surrounding the mysterious figure.

“Well well, it’s been awhile, Jupiter,” the librarian avatar greeted her

“I need some very hard-to-find information, Librarian,” Mori replied, reaching into her trench coat and pulling out a digital version of a computer chip. “I have the latest game code and exploits from Final Fantasy 34 right here if I get what I want.”

Librarian nearly leapt across the counter for the chip, but Mori quickly pulled it out of her reach. “If I get this rare information, Librarian,” the hacker repeated.

The librarian huffed. “I’ve done what I could to dredge up everything about what you asked. There’s not much, but what’s there is pretty incriminating. Planning some heist, Jupiter? Another untraceable hack?”

“Something like that,” Mori replied vaguely. She wasn’t quite the bored black hat hacker she once was. She was doing something good with her skill and getting a good view of the Major’s behind as a bonus. She had her motivations.

Librarian pushed the digital papers across the desk. “This guy covers his tracks. That’s all I have.”

Mori plucked the files from the desk, thumbing through them. Schematics, diagrams, business proposals. This was more than they’d had thus far. She placed the chip containing the game code on the desk as payment. “Good doing business with you again, Librarian.”
The librarian snatched up the chip with the glee of a kid receiving candy.

Mori thumbed through the files, skimming them as she exited the unscrupulous library, pausing as she reached a file. *Mikami*. It was a darkNet profile. There was little information, not even an origin or source, simply a name and a photo of his avatar. Long, unkept jet black hair framing a pair of black plastic glasses. Mori frowned. The avatar was wearing a suit. The guy really did look like he pulled his image straight from the *Deathnote* character with the same name. She’d question his seriousness if it weren’t for how well he covered his tracks.

She stared at the avatar some more. She’d *seen* this avatar before. She was absolutely certain. But when? She’d been diving the darkNet a long time, but this memory felt recent. It gave her the chills. It was possible she’d seen him this trip.

Mori turned down the darkNet street. She had to leave this place with all the data she could before Mikami realized she’d snagged data about him and his biothetic research. She’d never felt paranoid about this place before, like she was being watched. The place had eyes and ears, but she always worked only with the most discrete channels.

She felt the tether she kept with her, the digital link to her body back in the waking world. She began transferring the data through it, back to Ishikawa and Borma waiting for whatever she’d found. The data transfer would be quick, but she’d paused in her return home, spotting the avatar through the crowd. He stuck out like a black tulip in a field of daisies wearing catsuits.

Mikami. He *was* here.

She turned, blending in with the crowd and traveling further down the electric avenue.

“Going somewhere?”

The voice jarred her, sending chills down her digital spine as a hand reached out to touch her shoulder. “Something like that,” she replied vaguely, reaching into her trench coat for a virus-tipped knife. Spinning around, she prepared to attack, nearly gasping in surprise. “Mikami?!”

“You do know who I am. I can’t let you leave with that information.” He grasped her wrist, stopping her attack with a dagger.
“You look like a creepy anime character, I’d say!” she spat out sharply, withdrawing a second dagger from her coat with her free hand. She could take him out, poison his avatar and escape with the data. It would affect him in the real world. It was a mild virus, but it was enough to pinpoint Mikami’s real face.

He wrapped his hand around the other wrist, halting a second attack. His mere touch was altering the virus like a pixelated plague.

Mori stared. “Just who are you?!”

“You won’t live long enough to find that out,” Mikami threatened. “Will you…..

…….Kasumi Mori.”
Transmission intercepted - VIRUS

Chapter Summary

After Mori suffers a brutal attack while in the darkNet, Section 9 is left scratching their heads at who the mole in the Section truly could be. While the investigation into the Collective and Mikami had slowed, Motoko tries to gather some information from Section 2's database ghost.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This is bad.” Batou ran a hand through his hair, scowling at the nearly lifeless body of Mori in the infirmary. She lay on the bed, several nodes plastered to her head.

“We’re not entirely certain what happened,” Ishikawa shook his head. “She was diving and the next thing we saw was a message across our screens. ‘Help.’”

“She’s being affected by a highly complex virus,” Borma explained. “It’s trying to rewrite her entire brain. I’ve managed to put her in a coma-like state and stunt her cyberbrain’s activity. I have several routines currently working to remove the virus but it’s working fast. I’m able to keep it at bay but just barely.”

“Is she at least pulled from the darkNet?” Aramaki questioned, entering the room with the Major.

“After receiving the call for help, we pulled her out,” Ishikawa replied. “She always keeps herself tethered whenever she dives so she can withdraw quickly.”

Motoko frowned, furrowing her eyebrows. The conversation with Aramaki about a possible spy within her ranks was still fresh in her mind. Mori was definitely not the snitch, not if she ended up in a state like this. “Do you think she encountered Mikami?”

The three men stared at Motoko for a moment, Aramaki seemingly unfazed by the notion.

Ishikawa spoke first. “What do you know, Major?”
She glanced at Aramaki for a moment.

“I’ve filled her in on Mori’s history,” Aramaki explained. “Much of her origins have always been obscured and hidden, much like any of ours. Mori is entrenched in the darkNet as a very skilled hacker known as Jupiter.”

“Wait, that’s Jupiter?!” Batou blurted out. “The one who shut down the media right when cyberization first became more mainstream?”

Aramaki nodded. “She apparently did it because she was bored. When I had learned of her identity through my sources, I knew I needed her in Section 9. The darkNet was always one place where we lacked knowledge. Someone like Jupiter was a master of the place, so for her to be affected by a virus like this, it had to be someone powerful and just as knowledgeable.”

“She has skills that are reminiscent of the Laughing Man, but it seems that she only wanted to use her skills for something important,” Motoko added. “I had suspected her as a potential rat, but hearing of her origins and seeing her state now, I have no reason to believe she is the one feeding the Collective information.”

“I had mentioned the idea of a rat to her earlier today,” Ishikawa added. “She wanted to dive into the darkNet right away to find any traces of the rat and information that she could find. I think she found something. She opened up a data stream right before sending the help message. The data is scrambled. I have Proto and the Tachikoma attempting to piece it together.”

“Once we remove the virus, we may be able to pull the data straight from her memory,” Borma added. “Best case scenario, she’ll wake up and talk to us.”

“Worst, we’ll have to break the news to her wife,” Ishikawa frowned.

“Let’s not go that far just yet,” Motoko assuaged the worry. “I trust in Borma’s ability to create vaccines. Let’s let that work for now and see what data we can piece together.”

“I really hate waiting,” Batou complained.

“That seems to be all we can do right now,” Aramaki admitted. “There have been no threatening notes concerning the attack this morning nor any news of Mikami accessing Section 2’s database.”
again. Yet given the attack, we do need to take one proactive step. Major, this one’s up to you.”

………

“You think that Mikami may actually come to threaten me?” The blue-haired ghost of Section 2’s database stared at Motoko.

“One of our own now lies in a coma, fighting a wizard-level virus that threatens to rewrite her cyberbrain,” Motoko reiterated. “We believe that Mikami was behind the attack. We’re not certain how he would’ve recognized her avatar but it seems he’s much more skilled than we gave him credit for.”

The ghost frowned. “It’s still hard to think he’d actually attempt to kill a girl, much less anyone.”

Motoko pulled a chip from her pocket, tossing it to Ami. The ghost grasped it, images of fragmented research and scenes began spreading out like a multitude of monitors in the air. She skimmed through the data, watched the scenes, but one stuck out. She plucked it out of the air, the image of the raven-haired man with glasses.

“That is a piece of information Mori attempted to send to us right before the attack,” Motoko explained. “Do you recognize him?”

Ami stared some more, her face twisting into sadness and horror. “Mikami. This is the avatar of the sweet boy who visits me and requests information. It can’t be. How could he be the one behind this? He always brought me a new chess piece. I know they’re just bits, but they meant something to me. What could’ve changed in him?”

“We’re not sure,” Motoko shook her head. “We’re not even sure who he is outside his avatar. Mori managed to find information but it was scrambled when she was struck with the virus. We could use your help in unscrambling the information and seeing if this is indeed the same Mikami you know and love.”

Ami stared at the digital image some more. She had asked to do some good with her life, to work with Section 9. This was her opportunity. They needed her help. She could finally get out of Section 2’s boring work.
But to think Mikami could be behind a debilitating virus, that he could cause the deaths of so many innocent people.

She suddenly stared upward, grasping the chip and withdrawing all the images back into it. “Hide.”

Motoko didn’t question the directive, quickly ducking behind a large shelf and staying out of sight. Pixels reached forward, forming a human male form. He stood tall, raven black hair that looked unkept and nearly completely hid his black glasses.

“I’ve brought something for you.” His voice was deep with a bit of a sharpness to it. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a single chess piece.

“A queen?” Ami took the piece. “That’s sweet, Mikami.”

Motoko was tempted to lean just a bit to try to grab a glimpse of Mikami, but she wanted to remain unnoticed. Ami had purposely told her to hide, not leave. It was her opportunity to observe the avatar. “Tachikoma, Mikami just arrived. I want you to search the area, find any traces of his presence or where he came from. Make sure you are not seen. We don’t want to put the ghost at risk.”

“Roger that, Major!” the Tachikoma replied. “We’ll use Miss Mori’s darkNet cloaking algorithm!”

Motoko began to record the conversation to share with the rest of the team. The visiting avatar hadn’t noticed her presence, possibly indicating he wasn’t actually in Section 2’s building. She’d hid her body well, but with diving, she couldn’t cloak herself. He had to be digitally diving here somehow.

“Your chess set is nearly complete,” he explained. “Perhaps you’ll entertain a game with me when it is.”

“I’m not sure that will happen,” Ami frowned, turning away from him. She couldn’t get that image from Motoko out of her mind. It sent chills up her digital spine. Mikami had always been kind to her, yet there was that shred of doubt that he wasn’t the culprit.

“There’s talk of a database restructure,” she lied. “After some data suddenly disappeared,
Sekiguchi thinks there’s a problem with the database. There’s nothing flawed with my designs. This was my one last hurrah.”

*She’s convincing*, Motoko noted to herself.

“Your database is infallible,” Mikami countered.

Ami turned, indicating the growing gap of data that seemed to fade into nothingness. “Ever since that hole appeared…. There’s talk of deleting me.”

“That Sekiguchi, he’s the one to blame!” Mikami hissed. “I’ll have to have a word with him.”

“Mikami!” She grabbed for his arm when he attempted to leave. “What are you planning on doing?!”

He stopped, not turning to meet her gaze. “I have to finish what I started. I can’t let anyone try to interfere before this is complete.”

“Mikami! What are you doing? What are you planning?” Ami grabbed at him, panicked.

“Something no one else is brave enough to do,” he replied. “All of that research has been wasted. It needs to be put to use, a proof of concept to prove its worth. No one else could see it, but I can. I’m doing all of this, everything….. everything is for this, for you.”

Ami stared at him. “For… for me?”

Mikami didn’t reply. Instead he turned, noticing a glint of something behind a bookshelf. “Is someone else here?”

“No one else visits,” Ami quickly protested, attempting to pull him away from Motoko’s hiding spot. “You’re the only one.”

“I’ll delete anyone who interferes, no matter the cost.” He pulled his arm from her grip, trudging
towards the bookshelf with malicious intent. “I’ll prove to everyone that prosthetics are worthless. Biology will reign supreme.”

Ami grabbed at him but quickly reeled backwards, dropping the chess piece as she stumbled into the bookshelf. Her hand was turning into pixels. She could feel it. It was the first she’d felt since she was first digitized. It burnt.

Mikami turned suddenly. “Ami!”

Motoko peered around the bookshelf, nearly gasping herself. The ghost was being deleted just by touching him. *The virus? The same one that attacked Mori?* The bookshelves around Mikami began to dissolve, turning into pixels and disappearing much like the data around the biothetic files. Motoko dove from the bookshelf, hiding behind another and opening a link directly to Ami. “I’m pulling you out of here. I won’t let you be deleted.”

Motoko pulled herself backwards, yanking the cords from the back of her neck before the effect could reach her. Acting quickly, she pulled Ami’s consciousness and ghost into a cyberbrain in a box, housing it and disconnecting the cords before she could be further deleted.

She sighed, leaning against the mainframe and cradling the cyberbrain in her arms. Ami would be safe there temporarily until Motoko could relocate the ghost to a new location. That was far too close. He was good, wizard-level good. He had an ability to delete data with his hand alone, but his words spoke of wanting to prove biology supreme. Just who is this Mikami and what was he really trying to accomplish?

Chapter End Notes

Motoko's something, isn't he? But what is his true initiative, I wonder. At least Motoko was prepared when visiting Ami else the ghost would've been deleted.

While it's never fully fleshed out, ghosts can be transferred to new homes. After all, Motoko does get a new body in the series and is transferred to it, so it must work somehow. I'd imagine a wizard-level hacker like Motoko would know how to do it in an emergency situation. After all, Section 9 does know how to do all the cool stuff.
Chapter Summary

As Section 9 keeps a watch on Section 2's building after Mikami's threat, they discuss what technology may be controlling the Collective. And soon, said technology leads them on a wild chase through downtown to try to stop it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“No signs of movement yet,” Saito reported over the cybercom.

Paz leaned against the wall of the building, flicking his cigarette as he stared upward. He knew that Saito was perched up there somewhere but he’d made himself quite hidden. Paz returned his attention to the Section 2 entryway, flicking his cigarette again. “Nothing here either.”

Motoko perched herself atop a Tachikoma, one leg dangling as she watched the building from the opposite side patiently. “Mikami did threaten to handle Sekiguchi, but after I yanked the ghost from the database, it’s possible he canceled the attack. I’d rather be safe than end up with more dead bodies.”

“I’m still trying to figure out this Mikami,” Togusa admitted, reviewing the data at headquarters as he flipped through all the information they’d gathered thus far. “His actions seem disjointed, almost like there are two playing the part.”

“How do you figure?” Paz questioned.

“First, we have the Mikami who demonizes prosthetics,” Togusa explained, “but then we have the Mikami who attempted to delete the Major in the database and potentially dove into the darkNet to find Mori. From what I gather, the darkNet is only accessible with cyberization.”

“We do need to consider the possibility that these biothetics can act like regular prosthetics,” Motoko pointed out. “Remember the finger that arrived at the Prime Minister’s office? It looked real but it was built of circuits.”
“Biological circuits,” Togusa noted. “None of the bodies here show any signs of ports or a means to interface with computers. It does make me wonder if there’s some other means that these biothetics use to reach technology.”

“Nothing that won’t give us nightmares.” Paz flicked his cigarette. “The damn things are grown on people. Here I thought the Solid State Society was messed up.”

“No doubt,” Motoko agreed. “These biothetics are connected to known technology somehow. Consider the boxes that show up before an attack or that unusual static both Proto and the Tachikoma picked up from there.”

“I can weigh in on that one,” Ishikawa chimed in. “Now that Mori’s finally stabilized, I’ve had a chance to run some analyses on the noise we’ve gathered. It’s an old radio wave.”

“Radio?” Motoko echoed. “No one uses that anymore.”

“Exactly,” Ishikawa agreed. “Radio waves went unused after the 3rd World War. If these boxes were sending radio waves through the air to control the attackers, we’d have nothing to pick them up. Everything is cyberized and digital.”

“All Net and satellite,” Saito added. “They wouldn’t even interfere with our cybercoms. They’d be virtually invisible to us.”

“Batou’s theory wasn’t that far off,” Togusa noted.

Motoko stared off at the building for a moment, Old technology to carry out modern attacks. What an unusual strategy. “So what is in these signals, Ishikawa?”

“Static mostly,” Ishikawa replied. “To us, anyway. I had Proto observe them in a stunted environment thinking it was something affecting biological circuitry.”

“There’s no way Proto is actually running on biothetics,” Saito frowned at the idea.

Ishikawa leaned back in his seat in the computer room, flipping through the data gathered about
the signals. “He’s definitely not. He’s comprised of biological circuitry but he is still cybernetic. But the thing is, he was able to hear something in the static when we first encountered it back at the Kotobuki building. The static began to affect him, so I had to yank the tests, but what he heard was something like words.”

“Like words?” Saito echoed. “How can it be like words?”

“Well Proto described it to something more akin to programming syntax,” Ishikawa replied. “Just from a few moments of listening to it, Proto’s now shouldering something akin to a bad flu.”

“Proto can get sick?” Paz nearly said aloud in surprise as he watched a few cars putter past the building. A sports car, a delivery van, a convertible driven by a man who thought shirts were optional in the colder weather.

“After reviewing some specs for bioroids, no, it’s supposed to be impossible,” Ishikawa added. “Borma has him under some observation but he seems to be just under the weather. It’s almost as if this radio wave was trying to reprogram his biological circuitry and it failed.”

“That would explain why none of us have been affected by this, even in the center of the broadcast,” Togusa reasoned. “And during our raid on Kotobuki, Proto never entered the building. He heard the static but perhaps being connected to the internal Net shielded him from the effects that time.”

Motoko peered down at her Tachikoma perch, the tank peering around curiously watching the nearby airspace. She thumbed through some data from the Net about old radio technology. “The Tachikoma were unaffected, as well. But it makes me wonder, radio signals were analog. They couldn’t transmit code or data.”

“I wondered about that too,” Ishikawa admitted. “But from Proto’s descriptions, it’s actually spoken code. Someone is speaking it as if they are reading the code word from word. What Proto repeated out to me is the start of a routine.”

“A back door into the biotic system, perhaps,” Paz reasoned.

“That’s what I’m thinking,” Ishikawa agreed. “And explains Proto’s adverse reaction to it.”

“And how has this Collective has gotten this many people to die for their cause?” Paz flicked his
Popping the hatch open, Motoko crawled into the Tachikoma, manually overriding the controls. “I’m going to see if I can spook it away. Daimon, anything in side?”

“Five people attempting to claw at the door,” Daimon replied, staring thoroughly unimpressed at the assailants. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

With a grand leap, the Tachikoma skidded down the side of the building, landing on the street with a resounding thud that frightened a few people at the nearby coffee shop. The tank whirred down the street, heading towards Hanamichi to intercept the van. As soon as the van had pulled up to the intersection, it immediately took off.
“Paz, get an Uchikoma and head down the parallel street,” Motoko ordered. “Saito, track this van from the skies. We don’t want this thing aimlessly broadcasting that signal.”

“Might already be doing that,” Saito frowned, tracking the van’s movements with his Hawkeye. “There’s some strange activity in the coffee shop you just passed.”

Paz scowled, flicking his cigarette and stomping it out with his shoe as an Uchikoma rolled up. “Dammit, this is getting reckless. Any way to jam that signal, Ishikawa?”

“This is really old technology we’re talking here,” Ishikawa fussled. “But it’s not beyond what I can do. I’ll work on some countertechnology, but at the moment, you’ll need to catch that van.”

“Fine by me,” Paz leapt into the Uchikoma’s hatch, bolting down the street parallel to where the van was driving.

“I don’t have a clear shot,” Saito frowned. “I can’t take out the van from here. It’s just turned right on Sandori Street. It’s heading downtown.”

The Tachikoma tilted as it turned around the corner sharply. “Paz, take a shortcut down Nidori street,” Motoko instructed, focusing on the van before her. “Tachikoma, try to take out the tires.”

“Roger that, Major!” the Tachikoma replied cheerfully. A whirr and a clunk within the machinery and it had loaded some caltrop spikes, preparing to fire it when the van suddenly careened off the street and into the nearby building.

Opening the hatch, Motoko leapt from the tank, rolling before landing on her feet. “Tachikoma, check for any injured civilians!”

“Roger that, Major!” The tank quickly busied itself with picking up any debris, searching for people who may have been injured. It lifted a piece of wall, finding a few people huddled beneath it safely. “You’re okay! Now hurry to safety!”

She yanked open the door, finding the driver now dead and leaning against the steering wheel. In the center of the console was an old-fashioned radio connected to the van’s entertainment system.
Reaching over the body, she yanked the cables.

Paz rolled up in the Uchikoma, opening the hatch to see Motoko emerge with the radio. “The hell is going on.” Just when they thought they had found out more information, they were presented with this. Paz rubbed his forehead. He needed another cigarette.

Chapter End Notes

The two of the streets here are simply numbered streets. Sandori is 3rd street and Nidori is 2nd street.

Yeah there's a bit of technobabble in here. But in essence, radio waves are simply non-digital waves in the air. Since everything in this world is essentially digital, an analog signal would be very strange and difficult to deal with.

The war they reference was actually a cold war before the 4th World War had sank the eastern half of Japan. I'd imagine that they ditched the old analog technology probably around the 3rd just because of the timing for cyberization.
Chapter Summary

An old radio, a runaway van, and doctored documents and their only link seems to be Mikami. What is his true intention and what might it have in store for Niihama?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Now there’s a fossil,” Ishikawa commented, staring at the radio on the table. Videos of the local news feeds played on the screen, focusing mostly on Channel 33’s broadcast as it rattled on about a runaway van that was apprehended by Public Security. “Never thought I’d see one of these actually working again.”

“This thing caused so much trouble, putting so many lives in danger,” Togusa frowned at the hunk of technology. “Mikami had been so calculating before now. This doesn’t seem like his MO.”

“It feels like a botched attempt at attacking Section 2,” Motoko admitted. “It’s like they knew we were there and went along with the plan regardless.”

“There’s no way he could’ve realized I was standing there to keep watch,” Paz leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “It’s like he knew we’d changed our team makeup just to stay ahead of him. How the hell did he know?”

“I hate to admit it, but there may actually be a leak here,” Togusa frowned. “We know it’s not one of us. We know it’s not Mori, and I’m pretty certain it’s not Daimon either given her reactions at the recent attacks. Aozora has been on guard duty for the Prime Minister this entire time.”

“That doesn’t leave us with many options,” Saito sighed.

“None, really,” Ishikawa shook his head. “The only ones left are the lab techs and they don’t know our assignments.”

“System virus?” Saito worried.
“Borma would’ve noticed that immediately,” Ishikawa pointed out.

“Dammit, what the hell is going on?” Batou nearly kicked the table in frustration.

Motoko turned, watching the replay of the footage of the destruction after the crash. The incident played over and over again in her mind. “There’s something that Saito observed when during the chase that has me thinking. You noticed that some people at the coffee shop began behaving strangely after the van drove by.”

“Yeah,” Saito recalled. “It almost looked like they’d become zombies for a moment but then returned to normal when you chased that van. I didn’t see where they went after that, but there’ve been no reports of deaths in the area aside from the van driver.”

“And only those with biological circuits would be affected,” Togusa recalled the earlier conversation. “More people with biothetics….. Just how many people are affected? Or maybe infected.”

“It’s like they’ve spiked the damn coffee,” Batou fussed. Good thing he didn’t drink any.

Togusa frowned at his own cup sitting on the table, quickly setting it back on the table.

The screen flickered, switching off the newscasts as the blue-haired ghost appeared on the screen, flanked by a pair of digital Tachikoma. “I apologize for the interruption.”

“So you must be the ghost,” Batou peered at the screen.

“Ami Midorikawa,” she introduced herself with a bow. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“How is the hand?” Motoko asked.

“I repaired it with some code,” Ami replied, holding the newly repaired hand close to her heart. She still couldn’t believe the Mikami she’d come to treasure would wield such a destructive power. It seemed like her wound was an accident, but she was now certain that Mikami wasn’t who he seemed to be.
“I’m glad to hear that.” Motoko didn’t press on the recent battle. Instead she lead with what she believed Ami had arrived to discuss. “Did you find something of interest?”

“I did.” Ami was more than happy to return to the research at hand. “With the Tachikoma’s help, I managed to reassemble one of the files sent back from the darkNet. It’s a partial file, but it was far too important to wait.”

With a flick of her wrist, she brought the partial file up on the screen. The bottom half was pixelated, disappearing into cyberspace until she found the remaining bytes somewhere within the heap she was sorting.

“The hell is all that technobabble?” Batou squinted at it, observing that the paper was covered in technical diagrams and schematics.

“A schematic proposal,” Ami replied. “Or part of one. It lays out the exact circuitry of a biological prosthetic, right down to the chemical composition of the circuitry.” With a swipe of her hand, she spread out the partially deciphered documents.

“That’ll make it easier to detect, especially if there’s a widespread epidemic of biothetics unknowingly implanted,” Ishikawa noted, looking over the diagrams.

“There is something of interest marked in this document, thus the sense of urgency,” Ami continued as she pulled a document from the collection. “It mentions a fallacy in the technology. Certain magnetic waves, like in old AM radio signals, could cause a disruption in how the biothetic functioned.”

“What kind of disruption?” Togusa wondered. “The erratic behavior we’ve witnessed or something that could cause someone’s brain to stop working?”

“The details are sparse at the moment,” Ami replied with a bit of a frown, “but the documents mention that exposing their test subjects to these waves caused them to become dazed, falling into a state they called the ‘Collective Conscious.’”

“A collective conscious,” Motoko turned the words over in her head. “That sounds like a hive mind mentality to me, a sort of collective order and will to control a group of people. That matches up with the behaviors we’ve seen with the radio signals broadcast from those boxes and that delivery
van. It could very well be the meaning of the Collective we’ve seen mentioned over and over again.”

“There’s one more thing that is particularly peculiar,” Ami added. “The proposal is from Hayabusa Pharmaceuticals, a different company than the one who filed the patent from biothetics.”

“That’s an old medicine company,” Ishikawa recalled. “They went out of business when they couldn’t evolve with technology.”

“That’s the one,” Ami nodded. “The one that filed the patents and was raided was Ogami Biologics. I recall those files clearly. If I still dreamt, I would have nightmares about them.”

“And somehow, after Hayabusa shut its doors, the schematics ended up in the deepest reaches of the darkNet,” Togusa reasoned, “and Ogami either purchased or stole them.”

“Likely the latter,” Paz commented. “This Ogami operates like a yakuza outfit. Legal biological technology on the outside, biothetics on the inside.”

“Ogami had submitted a good number of patents,” Ami recalled. “I once had a section filled with their work in my database. I had worked on their cases a number of times when I was still an investigator for Section 2, even met their CEO a few times.”

“Mi?” Ishikawa recalled the names from the patents.

“No, it wasn’t Mi,” Ami shook her head. “His name was Fujikawa. At some point after I’d merged myself with the database, he’d retired and his protege had taken over. The patents ceased for some time before resuming with biothetic research. It was as if the company had done a complete 180.”

“Who handled the Ogami case after you?” Motoko questioned.

“He signed his work as Mikami,” Ami replied. “Public facing documentation doesn’t mention this. Only internal documents ever did. But he always delivered new documents in person. That’s how I’d come to know him.”
“Did you know him before you fused with the database?” Motoko pressed on, recalling how the Mikami avatar interacted with her.

“I’m not sure honestly,” Ami frowned. “No one at Section 2 had that surname, but I must’ve since he knew I played chess.” She resisted mentioning what Mikami had said to her, that everything he was doing was for her.

“So we now know Mikami’s link to Ogami, the biothetics, and Section 2,” Togusa noted. “It’s also possible that since these files were from the darkNet that he’s adept at diving that deep like Mori is.”

“Given the attack in the Section 2 database, he’s more adept than we gave him credit for,” Motoko pointed out. “He literally deleted data and Ami’s hand simply by his touch.”

“He must’ve done the same to the biothetic files when I wasn’t looking,” Ami frowned. She didn’t like it when her data was damaged or garbled. It bothered her. It also bothered her that the avatar she thought was sweet was likely using her to reach hidden data. “I did notice some alterations of files earlier, but I had gone to correct them.”

“It’s very possible that he’s been altering the files he was giving you,” Ishikawa suggested. “When we’d reviewed the files before, even the public facing ones, it felt like something was doctored. It’s very likely that Mi is actually Mikami altering the work.”

Ami frowned sharply. “To think he was doing this all behind my back in my own library.”

“Miss Ami! Miss Ami!” one of the Tachikoma interrupted wielding a page of data in its hand. “We compiled another page, and this one’s kind of scary! It made us shutter in our shells. I hope it won’t give you nightmares!”

Ami almost didn’t want to take the page, but she knew it would help solve this biothetic nightmare. And it didn’t help that the team was staring back at her expectantly. She took the page, skimming it over and nearly dropping it.

“More trouble?” Togusa asked, concerned.

“It’s a page of a different proposal,” Ami nearly shuddered. “It proposes that biological circuitry
could be built using nanotechnology as a transport.”

“Nanotechnology?” Ishikawa echoed. “Like the microscopic machines that can be ingested to heal wounded tissue from the inside?”

“Selfsame technology,” Ami presented the information on the machine. “It’s proposed that they can use these nanites to carry biological circuits to build the circuitry from the inside without surgery. The document goes on to say that the risk is great in terms of the body rejecting the procedure, but it remains primarily untested.”

Motoko skimmed through the page. “Signed Mi.”

“Explains why not a single one of the assailants have had surgery,” Ishikawa frowned. “They may have not known they had biothetics in them either. Between the nanites and the radio waves, it’s like Mikami is using Niihama as a testing ground until these biothetics are perfected.”

“That’s damn unsettling,” Batou hissed.

“And it seems like he’s specifically targeting people without cyberizations,” Togusa observed. “It makes his research nearly invisible, and he can use them to lash out against those who shut down Ogami or get in his way.”

“He did mention that he needed a proof of concept when we encountered him in the database.” Motoko folded her arms, drumming her fingers in thought. “Ami, does it say anything about the effects of someone cyberized?”

“According to the second page, all attempts at combining cybernetic and biothetic parts failed,” Ami replied. “The biothetic components actually died in the process.”

Togusa frowned, knitting his fingers together. “We’ll need to pull all uncyberized agents off the field. Really that’s just Aozora and Azuma. My cyberization is slight, which should be enough, but I think it’s best I pull off the field as well.”

“By current technology, nanites aren’t airborne,” Ishikawa pointed out.
“I’d rather not take the risk,” Togusa admitted. “Not until we know how this is spread.”

“Perhaps Batou isn’t that far off,” Motoko suggested. “Perhaps it really is in the coffee.”

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully this chapter didn't get too technobabbly, but some of the technobabble here is real technology. AM radio waves are actually magnetic (which is just weird but cool) and nanotechnology has been tested to repair a body from the inside out. It's also been proposed as a means to transport organic tissues, which is the reference to biothetics being transported here.

Mikami is a clever little shrew. He's using old technology and forging documents to cover his tracks as he possibly uses the entire city of Niihama as a test grounds. Unsettling little shrew is more like it. Batou has the right of it. It is damn unsettling.
Chapter Summary

With Motoko suspecting coffee as Mikami’s means to infect Niihama with biothetics, she and Paz head to the most popular coffee shop in the city for some investigations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Motoko’s eyes focused on the coffee shop barista as he puttered about in an attempt to fulfill orders quickly. He was partially cyberized, marked by the distinct line across his face separating flesh from machine. At the counter stood Paz, an expert at not being conspicuous, who casually chatted with the attractive cashier lady and discussed the various flavors of coffee.

Cross-referencing various credit card charges, Ishikawa had found this particular coffee shop had been a favorite of multiple biothetic victims. It wasn’t out of the ordinary. Coffee was wildly popular, and Kuma Coffee was at the top of the list for popular cafes. Yet Batou’s comment about something being in the coffee had struck the investigator.

Motoko had taken the task of investigating personally as she wouldn’t be affected by the nanites at all. Paz was partially cyberized, but she needed his quick talking and ability to blend in. It was possible that Mikami already knew they were there. She was hoping this operation ran independently without his watchful eyes.

Mikami had an inside source, keeping him one step ahead of Section 9. The pair had left covertly. Motoko had noticed Aozora was back to playing that cellphone game that seemed to only irritate Batou more and more. Motoko was certain Batou would break that cellphone at one point. Who used played cellphone games anymore now that there were infinite games on the Net? Then again, he wasn’t cyberized. He didn’t have that luxury.

Mori was still in a coma but fortunately she’d stabilized, Borma busying himself with extracting some of her last memories to understand what she’d encountered to put her into such a state. Daimon, a long time friend of Mori, had taken the opportunity to sit down with Mori’s wife and attempt to lessen some of the worry that Mori would never wake up.

Batou and Saito had dispatched to a different coffee shop from the same chain, hoping that one of the two parties would find some success in learning what was in the coffee. Motoko had hoped the theory was wrong, that Mikami wasn’t using the city as his test subjects, that a mass infection of biothetic nanites wasn’t actually happening.
But Motoko also knew of the corruption that happened in the human mind. An entire city as unwilling test subjects to a banned technology was easy pickings. He’d covered his tracks, destroyed the data, and killed so many. Mikami was playing god with biological technology.

She stirred from her thoughts as Paz placed two cups of coffee on the table. “The fanciest coffee that they had. It’s got everything in it, probably even the kitchen sink.”

“How do people even drink this stuff?” Motoko stared at the coffee frothing through the plastic lid. “What is in this?”

“Caramel, creamer, whip, and chocolate,” Paz frowned.

Perhaps it was her cybernetic side that really didn’t care for such wild drinks. She really only drank something that was nutritional. Cyborg drinks as Togusa often put it. “Must be appealing to someone who has taste. Though if their sign on the door is any indication, they cater to both cybernetic and non-cyberized tastes.”

“I’d rather smoke menthols,” Paz scoffed at the coffee. “But between the two cups, there is every ingredient this coffee shop uses. The cashier didn’t seem to know of any secret ingredient but said the whip was used on nearly every fancy coffee, sometimes the normal ones. If it were up to me, that’s where I’d put it.”

“Ruining whipped cream, what a shame.” She glanced around the coffee shop. People puttered about their normal day, most sporting the ports on the back of their necks or showing the tell-tale lines of cybernetic implants on their bodies. They were in a richer area of the city, a place where people could afford cybernetics. But it was also a major business area that attracted all sorts of people.

“Keep an eye out for anyone suspicious,” she added over the cybercomms to Paz. Motoko pulled a vial from her jacket, popping the plastic coffee lid and scooping some of the whip into it. Through various resources, the Chief had managed to attain a rather sizeable supply of a reagent that could detect nanites in a substance. She corked the tube, shaking it and waiting for a reaction.

“Nothing,” Paz frowned. “Maybe he doesn’t think as much like a yakuza as I thought.”

Tucking the tube back into her jacket, she pulled out another one. “It could be the coffee itself.”
Nanites are activated by heat.

“I’m just hoping it’s not some new strain of nanite we can’t detect,” Paz frowned.

“That would be our luck, wouldn’t it?” Motoko pushed some of the whip over with the lid, scooping up the coffee in the tube and repeating the process.

“Absolutely nothing here,” Batou’s annoyed voice announced itself over the cybercomm.

Motoko frowned. She’d come up with nothing as well. The theory was sound, and while she was hoping that the coffee actually wasn’t spiked with nanites, it seemed to be a bit of a letdown that it wasn’t.

“I wonder.” She peered up at Paz for a moment. He was wearing his usual suit with a scarf wrapped around his neck for the cooler weather this time of year. For all intents and purposes, Paz looked uncyberized and very fleshy. He wasn’t as prosthetized as some of the team, and what was, wasn’t noticeable.

The cashier had to be rather observant to notice that Paz had come in with her and that she was cyberized. The ports on her neck were a pretty dead giveaway, as were the reddish eyes, that she was cybernetic at least in part. But Paz tended to look less cyberized and it allowed him to blend in more than the rest of the team. “Paz, did the barista make your drink differently than mine?”

Paz peered at the two drinks. “Yeah, sea salt. Apparently makes it taste better for those without cyberized taste buds.”

“Interesting thing to say,” Motoko commented, pulling another tube from her jacket. “But this place does advertise that it caters to those with taste buds.” Popping the lid off the second coffee, she scooped up some of the coffee, waiting for a reaction, and sure enough, the tube didn’t disappoint. It began to turn an alarming green color. “Bingo.”

“Always the pretty ones that try to poison you,” Paz commented.

“Saito, Batou, did the cashier ask if you both had cybernetic taste buds?” Motoko questioned.
“She did,” Saito replied. “Seemed a little strange but there was a sign on the door that said it catered to both cybernetic and biological tastes.”

Motoko stared at the coffee in thought before peering back at the chipper cashier. She was certainly more observant than the one in the other coffee shop, but Motoko wasn’t certain she was actually at fault here. “This coffee chain’s been here awhile.”

“Yeah, it predates the last war,” Batou replied, pulling up some data. “Based in Tokyo before that half of the country got wrecked. They started catering to cybernetic tastes when that became more commonplace.”

“And that was before the biothetics were even proposed,” Motoko recalled the documents. “I think this place is being used because of its practices.”

“Normally I’d say let Section 2 handle this, but I wouldn’t trust them as far as I could throw them right now,” Batou frowned at the coffee cups on the table.

“That’s pretty far, Batou,” Motoko teased.

“Yeah I wouldn’t trust them close neither,” he added sharply.

“And I don’t think a shutdown is really needed just yet,” Motoko continued. “We need a sample of that sea salt. Apparently that’s the extra ingredient for non-cyberized tastes.” She stood up from the table. “I’ll need to use the restroom.”

Paz nearly snorted, knowing full well that was just a cover for sneaking into the back. “I’ll hold down the fort.” He fished a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, scowling as he noticed a ‘no smoking inside’ sign. “Damn hippy coffee joints.”

Motoko rounded the corner for the restrooms, glancing around to familiarize herself with the settings. It was a pretty simple setup that looked like it hadn’t been changed in decades. With no one nearby, she activated the thermoptic camouflage, making herself invisible as she slipped in the swinging employee door.

The back room was mostly storage. Large containers of coffee beans lined the walls, flanking either side of an industrial-sized coffee grinder. Supplies sat upon the shelves. Paper cups, boxes of
straws, those cardboard cozies that wrapped the cup so customers didn’t burn their hands. She ducked behind the shelves, searching for the supplies as two employees entered the back room.

“That’s the second time today someone’s complained about the sea salt,” the cashier fussed, reaching on the shelf to pull some chocolate out of the box. “Do you think there’s something wrong with it?”

“Dunno,” the barista shrugged. “There’ve been complaints about it for the past two weeks. It’s the same stuff we always get. Maybe we got a bad batch.”

“For two weeks?” the cashier frowned. “At this rate, we’ll be shut down. I don’t wanna lose my job. I gotta pay for college somehow. Maybe we should throw it out.”

“They’ll probably take that outta our paychecks,” the barista rubbed at the back of his head. “Let’s tell the boss lady. She’ll be worried about this too.”

“Yeah,” the cashier agreed. “Better she decide than us. Besides, if we lost our jobs, I’d miss all the cute boys who come into the store. Like that one in the suit that looked like he’s a mob boss.”

“You really need to stop watching those old American mafia movies,” he chided her, pushing the door open as they went back to work.

Motoko watched them leave. Two weeks ago was right before the Kotobuki incident. She reached into the box, removing a bag of salt and tucking it into her jacket. Mikami really was poisoning the coffee, and this bag of salt could be the key to help resolving this infestation. Carefully she snuck out the employee door then releasing the camouflage as she exited the hallway near the restrooms. She folded her jacket over with her hands, acting as if she didn’t have a bag of salt tucked within it.

She approached the table, taking the cup in hand. “We should head back to the chief.” She stared at the coffee. Right now it was just a caffeinated sugary mess that wouldn’t do them any good. The bag of salt was all they needed. She reached over, tossing the cup into the compost.

“Works for me.” Paz followed suit, dropping the cup into the compost and fishing for a cigarette.

Chapter End Notes
Paz is so much fun to write for. He seems perpetually annoyed by things and thinks kinda like everyone is a yakuza. He also is pretty passable for being uncyberized, which worked to their advantage here. Motoko and Paz don't really get to do much investigation together in the series, so with Section 9's intent on mixing things up to throw off Mikami, the pair working together seems out of the ordinary and a perfect roose for their true intentions.
A salty situation - RAID

Chapter Summary

After finding that the sea salt at the popular Kuma Coffee was teaming with biothetic nanites, Motoko and Batou head towards a major distributor of sea salt for a raid. Will the Collective be waiting for them?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This seems like some sort of farce.” Batou leaned against the wall of the factory, frowning sharply despite being invisible with the thermoptic camouflage.

“We simply need the files here,” Motoko chided him. “Besides, the place should be fully automated with only a few workers here, even at this hour.” She rounded the corner, past the name of the factory plastered on the side of the wall in blue paint.

_Hataka Salt, the purest sea salt in all of Japan_, the sign boasted. The factory was well known as one of the largest and oldest surviving salt companies in the entire country. If it had somehow been affected, potentially all the food in the country could be teaming with nanites. Motoko wasn’t entirely certain where the coffee shop salt had been infected, but the Chief wanted to start with the source. She agreed with his reasoning, taking only Batou with her.

Salt was generally farmed on the shorelines but here was where the salt was processed then shipped out, here was where Kuma Coffee got its salt. Both bags retrieved from the coffee shop had nanites within them, leaving the distribution center here a likely culprit.

The full moon shone brightly on the delivery trucks, all lined up in the lot awaiting use in the morning. Motoko and Batou wove through them, barely needing their camouflage as the place had rather low standards in security. Not a security guard or cyborg walked the place, and they’d only spotted one old-fashioned closed circuit camera at the entrance.

“They really don’t watch the building, do they?” Batou commented, leaning against the warehouse door.

Motoko wrapped her hand around the door handle, pausing as a bot carting salt whizzed by. “How many people would raid a salt factory at night?”
“Obviously it’s the best place for a late night rave,” Batou replied sarcastically. “It’s where all the teens go now.”

Motoko nearly snorted a laugh, pushing the door open just a tad to get a peek inside. A few people passed by her field of vision wearing blue jumpsuits. Peering in a bit more, she spotted a number of people along the assembly lines. “Maybe your rave idea wasn’t that far off. I’ve spotted 10 people so far.”

“Who ever heard of a rave without any damn music?” Batou frowned. “You think it’s the Collective again?”

“Likely,” Motoko replied. “But they don’t seem on high alert, even with the door cracked open.” She tested the waters, pushing the door open when a few people passed by. No signs of attack, no signs of aggression. The people didn’t seem to notice that the door was partially open. “They don’t seem to notice us.”

“For the better,” Batou frowned, following Motoko in through the door and closing it quietly behind him. “I’d rather not have this many dead bodies on our hands. Think of all the paperwork! It’d be a mess!”

“We could bury them in the salt piles,” Motoko teased.

“Motoko,” Batou frowned.

“I kid I kid,” Motoko observed the people walking by a bit more. “Besides, the people here really haven’t noticed anything wrong. Seems our rat hasn’t noticed our little late night adventure yet.” She crept past a gaggle of people who seemed to be more staring at each other than speaking. Mori hadn’t been that far off when she described them as zombies. Truthfully she hadn’t been far off when she described it as an apocalypse. That girl had spent far too long in the darkNet. “Then again, only the Chief knows we’re here right now.”

“Do you hear that?” Batou stopped, standing up a bit taller to peer around the factory. There were far too many people here, all dressed in drab jumpsuits with no discernable logo or identification, but something had caught his attention. “It’s faint but I hear static.”

“Static?” Motoko paused, now alerted. “A radio? That would explain the zombie apocalypse
going on here.” Quietly, she leapt up to one of the nearby rafters for a closer look, landing softly in her boots.

“Thanks, Mori,” Batou scoffed, continuing traveling on the level below as Motoko searched above.

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“Who has batteries anymore?” Batou stepped around a few people, continuing towards the workbench where the orange radio sat. The static was loud and irritating. He wanted to smash the thing out of annoyance, but there were too many lives at stake to do that.

“It’s just an acidic reaction,” Motoko pointed out. “They could power it with an orange if they wanted to, honestly.”

“The color matches,” Batou scoffed as he finally reached the bench. There were a few people sitting by, which would make moving the radio a bit more difficult. He rounded them, observing the box and checking for wires. “Nothing. It’s movable.”

“We’ll need to get it to a Tachikoma to carry away from here and dispose of it safely,” Motoko instructed.

“They might want to play with it,” Batou scoffed, carefully wrapping a hand around the bottom of the radio like it was a bomb. “Then again, they hated that static noise.”

Motoko crossed the rafters, surveying the area more closely. There were several doors leading out, a few rolling doors where trucks pulled up to be loaded for delivery. A few offices sat nestled to one side as well as a breakroom for the employees. The rafters where she stood spanned much of the factory as a sort of observation deck that could serve as a means to transport the radio outside. “On second thought, we get this far enough away and turn it off. This may be our only chance in observing this signal in house.”

“And the only one that doesn’t seem like it’s running on a biothetic finger,” Batou added sharply.

“Let’s hope that’s not really what’s in there,” Motoko frowned, dropping from the rafters and landing on the ground next to Batou. “Though honestly at this point, I’d expect anything.”

“Major! Mr. Batou!” one of the Tachikoma called out. “There was a suspicious car that stopped in front of the parking lot gate for a moment. I couldn’t see who was in it but they drove off. Do you want me to follow it?”

Motoko paused, looking over her shoulder as if she could see through the walls and into the parking lot. It could be an actual culprit or it could be someone attracted to the radio they now had in front of them. “Take note of the license information and tag the car.”
“Damn, what else do we have to deal with tonight?” Batou rubbed the back of his head, frustrated.

“I’m not sure if it’s a culprit or not. It’s best we focus on what we have here first,” Motoko reassured him. “When you get the opportunity, grab that radio and take it into the rafters. We need to get that safely away from here and free these people from its spell without killing them. I’m going to dive into their system and see if I can find anything about Mikami or the Collective in their records.” She leapt into the rafters, quickly making her way to the office.

Easier said than done, Batou scoffed to himself. There were dozens of people here all roaming around like zombies. While he himself was perfectly invisible, the radio was not. So far, no one had noticed him pick it up for a moment, but now there were several groups near him that could cause a problem.

If previous encounters were any indication, that code blasting out in the static likely had an attack routine. If he were fighting assailants, that would be one thing. He could hit them and be on his way. These were civilians, test subjects being poisoned by sea salt in coffee. It sounded ridiculous no matter how he tried to frame it in his mind. Either way, he’d swear off coffee for awhile.

He glanced to the side. Motoko had likely slipped into the office by now, completely unnoticed. She’d likely be able to root up some information about the salty situation, but Batou still worried it could be a trap of some sorts. This Mikami wasn’t a fool, but neither was Motoko. He silently sighed, rubbing at the back of his head as he leaned against the workbench and watched the worker drones putter by.

The office had seen better days. Paperwork littered the floors and desks, flanked by pens and pencils in cups and a printer that looked like it was from the 1980s. Who even had actual paperwork anymore? Was that printer even functional? Motoko frowned, pushing some of the papers aside and sitting on the desk. She pulled some wires from her pocket, reaching over the desk and checking for some ports within the computer below the desk.

She laughed, sitting back up. “Floppy disks.” Seems that Mikami wasn’t the only one appreciating old hardware. This place ran on an old-fashioned computer. She’d have to hack an older way.

Tucking the wires back in her pocket, she spun around and situated herself on the old-fashioned rolling chair as she pulled herself closer to the keyboard. Her fingers glided across the keyboard, easily accessing the user files and the database.
She laughed to herself. For a highly modern, automated factory, this computer was old.

Batou stared.

And he stared some more. He was not getting a break. The unwilling Collective kept puttering by, not giving him a chance to swipe the radio safely.

“Mr. Batou! Major!” The Tachikoma’s voice suddenly interrupted the tense situation. “That black car circled again! It’s twice now! Should I try to chase it away? It’s sitting outside. I’m worried it might’ve already seen me.”

Batou paused a moment, scowling. “It’s like that damn car is trying to watch us. Who’s driving?”

“A man in a heavy coat with thick bushy hair,” the Tachikoma replied. “He’s keeping his head down. I can’t get a good read for an facial recognition search. I searched for the car’s registration and it’s a rental car assigned to a foreign woman.”

“Well that’s damn convenient,” Batou scoffed.

“The driver is likely trying to keep tabs on the place,” Motoko chimed in. “Their mainframe has to be at least 20 years old There’s more paper files than actual data.”

“Well that’s one way to keep off the grid,” Batou frowned.

“Get a closer look, Tachikoma,” Motoko instructed. “Be covert.”

“You got it, Major!” the Tachikoma acknowledged cheerfully.

“Batou, with someone watching the building, simply running off with the radio and leaving these
people to aimlessly wander would put them at risk," Motoko pointed out. "We'll need an alternate plan." She left the office with paperwork tucked in her jacket as she leapt into the rafters once again.

“Yeah I got an idea.” Batou turned, pulling up some schematics for old radios from the network. He fiddled with the radio for a moment, finding the worn wording for volume scrawled above a knob. If people were freed from the Collective control when the van drove off, then turning down the volume should do the trick.

He turned the volume down a bit, glancing over his shoulder to see the results. The people seemed to putter to a stop but didn’t show any signs of aggression. He turned the knob some more as Motoko landed next to him from the rafters. Motoko watched the people cautiously as Batou slowly turned the knob some more until the static completely sputtered out.

The people began to stagger and look dazed, grabbing at their heads for a moment and questioning how they got to this place and what they were wearing. Batou leaned against the workbench with a sigh of relief.

Motoko approached, dropping the camouflage. “We’re with Public Security----”

“What happened to us?” one panicked. “Why are we covered in salt?”

“It’s hard to explain, but you’re safe now,” Motoko quieted their fears.

“Major! The car left again!” the Tachikoma reported.

“Good timing,” Motoko commented, opening a line back to headquarters. “Chief, we have about 20 people rescued from the Conscious Collective. We’ll need a bus.”

“I’ll have one set right away, Major,” Aramaki replied.

Motoko welcomed the frightened closer. “We have a bus coming. We’ll have you all taken to a hospital. You’ll all be okay.”

Chapter End Notes
At least for once, the Collective victims didn't die. Perhaps it's finally looking up for Section 9.

I couldn't resist as many salt puns as humanly possible.
Ahead of the game - EGO

Chapter Summary

Mikami’s ego is likely now trashed after the raid on the salt factory. Section 9 is finally one step ahead but for just how long?

“I still can’t believe all the people were rescued,” Daimon sighed in relief. “We already have enough dead bodies on our hands.”

“Agreed,” Saito agreed. “How’s Mori’s wife?”

“Distraught,” Daimon replied, “but Tsubaki has a tendency to be overly melodramatic. Mori’s shown signs of recovery. I’m glad this wasn’t worse.” She glanced across the room, spotting Aozora fiddling with some sort of game again. The man seemed completely unfazed by the news of the rescue at the salt factory. “I hear Proto is out of commission too.”

“Proto’s stronger than he looks,” Saito reassured her. “He’s just down with the flu.” He resisted saying how Proto had gotten the flu. The new recruits weren’t aware that Proto was a bioroid and not a cyborg. With the problems with biological components abound at the moment and the suspicions of a mole, that information was best kept silent.

Daimon looked up as Togusa entered the room. “Are the rescued going to be okay?”

Togusa blinked, not expecting a compassionate question from someone who acted so tough all the time. Perhaps the situation was getting to her as much as it was getting to him. “Healthy,” he replied. “We’re still trying to recover the missing files to see if we can safely remove these biothetics.”

“Any luck at all with the files?” Saito questioned.

“Nothing that’ll help us with the rescued people,” Togusa answered vaguely, turning just enough to keep an eye on the two new recruits. Aozora was busy fiddling with that game, but Daimon quickly approached and towered over him.
“I want back in, Togusa,” she demanded. “This Mikami is going too far. I want to meet his face with my fist. I am not going to be benched for this.” Her intense orange eyes focused on him. “He’s put too many lives in danger, including Mori’s.”

He stared up at her, focusing on her expression and her demeanor. She could be the greatest actor standing before him, but something about those eyes spoke seriously. She’d twice now seen the assailants drop dead. But these assailants weren’t some terrorist group. They were unwilling guinea pigs. Those eyes worried about the safety of her friends. Those eyes wanted this to end.

“You are cyberized so you won’t be affected by the biothetics. I’ll see where I can place you,” he conceded. Turning to Saito, he added. “Ishikawa needs your link to the satellites to try to track something.”

“I’ll see what I can do to help out,” the sniper nodded, heading out of the room.

Togusa peered back up at Daimon. The taller woman had folded her arms but kept that same serious expression as before. “How long have you been back at headquarters?”

Daimon continued to stare, despite the surprise that Togusa had opened up a private link with her. “Since this morning. Tsubaki wanted me to stay overnight. She’s needy. Am I late?”

Aozora looked up from his game. “Another staring contest,” he commented to no one in particular, puttering out of the room and into the hallway. He’d been benched due to his lack of cyberization, so whatever they were doing likely didn’t concern him.

Togusa glanced at Aozora before returning to stare up at Daimon. This morning wasn’t exactly the largest of timeframes to notice anything strange recently. “No, you’re not late at all.” He paused a moment, turning to watch Aozora leave.

Daimon suddenly grasped him by the shoulder. “There’s something going on, isn’t there? I’m not an idiot. I’ve noticed Mikami’s been a step ahead of us. Someone’s feeding him information, aren’t they?”

Togusa didn’t respond at first. He honestly wasn’t sure how to respond, but he’d worked with Daimon enough to know she was sharper than she appeared. Sure, she liked to hit things and often served as muscle, but she was no pushover intellectually. He once made the mistake of accepting a friendly game of shogi. She wiped the floor with him.
“We’re not sure yet,” he finally replied.

“And if I’d venture a guess, you suspected us as a potential leak,” Daimon reasoned. “I’d suspect us too. We haven’t been here long. The only one of us who’s been acting strangely is Aozora. He’s distracted.”

Togusa couldn’t deny that Aozora was acting strangely, but as to exactly why, he still wasn’t certain. He could complete the job as well as his fellow agents, but lately he really did seem distracted.

“He mentioned something about losing a close friend, but he hasn’t really gone into details,” Daimon added.

“That could cause a distraction,” Togusa agreed. He’d already pulled Aozora off the case for his risk with getting infected. If he was dealing with personal issues, it was best he wasn’t working on such a high profile case anyway. “For now, let’s carry on. I’m bringing you back to this assignment. We need to close this case.”

……

“There it is,” Saito stated. “Are you getting this location?”

“Sure am,” Ishikawa leaned forward in the chair, looking at the coordinates now appearing on the screen. His fingers glided across the keyboard, bringing a satellite image into view. “I’ll be damned, there it is.”

“That is the car that kept circling the factory last night,” Motoko recalled the images the Tachikoma had retrieved. “Abandoned at the pier and partially submerged in water. That rental agency is never getting that car back.”

“The car was registered to a foreign woman from the American Empire, Serena Moon,” Ishikawa reported. “But according to travel records, Serena missed her flight. She’s still overseas.”

“Convenient,” Batou scoffed.
“Likely he just picked a car without an owner,” Motoko reasoned. “Any matches on the partial images the Tachikoma took yet?”

“Not yet,” Ishikawa shook his head, disappointed. “The man was good at hiding his face within the shadows. Not even image manipulation helped reveal more of his face. The only thing we’ve noticed is that he appears to be wearing a beanie and possibly more to obscure his features. Could be the real Mikami checking up on his work.”

“He’s gonna be pissed we broke up his little operation,” Batou pointed out.

“For once, we were the ones ahead of him,” Paz commented from the corner. “He’s gonna be real pissed about that.”

“No doubt a jab to his ego,” Motoko agreed. “A victory for us, though we are still no closer to finding out his identity. The factory’s records were slim at best. I only found a note stating that the salt going to Kuma Coffee would be mixed with an additional ingredient as requested by the shop. No doubt a falsified request. Any luck on unscrambling the files?”

“Nothing that will help us at the moment,” Ishikawa replied. “We have more schematics and a few written documents, but they’re still partials. No record that the biothetics can be removed either.”

“I want to help with that, I’d say.”

Motoko turned, feeling someone staring directly at her butt. Mori had arisen from the dead, leaning against the doorway with wires and cables still connected to her. Several techs behind her attempted to coax her back to the lab but she quickly swatted them away.

“That bastard thought he could get the better of me,” Mori smirked. “But I want to ruin his little plans for the apocalypse. I read those files. I can pull them from my memory. Just get these damn nodes off me.”

“We’ll need Borma to check and ensure the virus is completely gone,” Motoko informed her. “But we’ll be happy to have you back. Jupiter.”
Mori nearly melted into the doorway. “I… I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The Chief told us,” Motoko grinned, amused by her reaction.

Mori glanced at the gathered agents with wide eyes. “You’re…. not angry?”

Motoko shook her head. “Not at all. There’s likely worse here right now. Besides, the Chief assured us you used your skills for something other than boredom now. And right now, we need your skills and those files.”

Paz nearly laughed at the worse comment. Several here had their fair share of dark or peppered pasts. “Now we really will be ahead of Mikami and his sadistic little game,” he commented. “And your survival will really hit his ego.”

“The guy’s a damn egomaniac,” Batou pointed out. “He may do something desperate this time now that he’s losing the upper edge, and then we’ll be able to nab him.”

“They always make a mistake,” Motoko agreed.

“Hopefully soon. This Mikami is a menace.” Daimon frowned, towering over Togusa standing next to her.

“That is the hope,” Motoko agreed.

“I’m pulling Daimon back into this case as well. We’ll need all the help we can get.” He paused, expecting objections, but no one said anything. They had trusted his judgment in bringing the agent back in. “We’ll bring these two up to speed quickly and find this Mikami quickly.”

“And now we have the radio, we can investigate this signal more quickly,” Ishikawa added.

“That thing has to be at least 40 years old,” Mori squinted at the orange monstrosity on the counter as Borma plucked the nodes from her head. “How is that thing even---- no wait, I bet it’s powered by another finger.” She frowned sharply at the thought.
“Likely, but I haven’t bothered trying to open it,” Ishikawa admitted. “I have it connected in a closed environment, running some speech algorithms on the signal to match the spoken words and see what exactly is being broadcast in this static.”

“The radio signals mentioned in the documents,” Mori frowned some more. “They really are controlling biothetics with them. That section stuck out to me when I skimmed over them. That and Mikami’s avatar. I swear I’ve seen him before our encounter in the darkNet, almost like I’ve met him in person.”

“That’s an odd thing to say,” Paz pointed out.

“That’s just it,” Mori frowned even more. “It’s not the face that was familiar. It was that voice. I know I’ve heard it before. And what’s worse, he knew exactly who I was. He didn’t call me by Jupiter. He called me by my real name.”

“We can certainly try to run a voice match once we pull the memories from your cyberbrain,” Ishikawa offered. “Given that the virus didn’t corrupt them.”

“I still remember everything,” Mori countered. “Borma’s expert skills at counteracting viruses kept everything intact.”

“Major, you’ve encountered him before as well,” Togusa recalled. “Did his voice sound familiar?”

“Nothing I could place,” Motoko replied. “I may have heard it before, but at the time, it wasn’t my primary focus.”

“She’s clean of the virus,” Borma informed the gathered group. “We can extract those memories.”

“Excellent,” Mori nested in the familiar seat in the tech room. Reaching for the wires, she nearly leapt from the seat as a blue-haired woman took over the screens with a rather paranoid look. “When did we get such a hot AI?”

“I am a ghost within the mainframe,” Ami corrected her sharply. “But I’m here because of an emergency.”
“An emergency?” Motoko echoed. “Did you find more data?”

“Worse,” Ami replied. “Mikami. He paid me a visit. Here.”
Chapter Summary

With Mikami's sudden visit to the database's AI, Section 9 scrambles for answers and finally realizes Mikami’s real world identity. But has their realization come a bit too late?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Mikami. He paid me a visit,” Ami informed them. “Here.”

“How the hell?” Togusa questioned. “The only ones who know you’re here are us.”

“I don’t know,” Ami shook her head before holding up a chess piece. “He brought me a king. It’s like he’s telling me this is a checkmate.”

“His ego’s getting the better of him,” Paz commented. “The Major and Batou just busted apart his major source of nanites. Now he probably wants to try to prove that he’s still our better in a virtual pissing contest.”

“He did seem really irate,” Ami recalled. “He’s usually so calm.”

“Were you able to trace where he came from?” Ishikawa questioned.

“Not far,” Ami shook her head. “Just to the outskirts of the database. But he did leave a slight trail that matches what the Tachikoma had observed right before the Major pulled me from my original database. Judging by the traces, he’s definitely not using a physical connection. It’s almost as if he’s disappearing into a hidden network to do this.”

“The darkNet,” Mori reasoned.

“It’s still odd to think that someone so heavily against prosthetics would be using the darkNet as a means to travel,” Paz commented.
“Hey can you send me those signals?” Mori requested. Her fingers glided across the keyboard quickly as the lines of garbled characters spewed across her monitor.

Motoko leaned over the back of the chair. “You think you can trace this somehow?”

Mori attempted to focus despite Motoko being so close to her. “The darkNet isn’t as untraceable as some like to claim. It operates like a series of encrypted intergates. Each intergate attempts to scramble the signal, making it more difficult to trace. *Buuuuuuut* if you’ve hacked the gates before, interpreting the unscrambling the trace is easier. Not perfect, but easier.”

“Borma, think you can put up a net around our database to prevent Mikami from returning?” Togusa questioned.

“Likely,” Borma replied. “Might take me a few moments. I’ll collaborate with Ami on this one.”

Mori’s fingers clattered across the keyboard as she ran some algorithm and typed in some text commands as the numbers and code ran past on another window. “Let’s see. He jumped through only three gates. That means he’s either really good at jumping or is located close to here. But here’s the kicker. The trail cuts off at something that *isn’t* a cyberbrain.”

“The hell does that mean?” Batou frowned.

“He’s not physically connected to the darkNet,” Mori replied. “This should be impossible. Even the darkNet requires a cyberbrain to dive. Boy do I want to pick his brain on how he’s doing this, I’d say.”

“That’d explain how someone who hates cyberization is able to dive,” Paz commented.

“We do have those neck links that I used to wear before the cyberbrain,” Togusa pointed out, “but I never was able to dive with them.”

“This is much more sophisticated than that, I’d say,” Mori pointed out. “Diving requires complex circuitry and active thought. He could very well have a very efficient AI or is more adept at working with circuitry than I thought.”
“What if he’s working with biothetics as a proof of concept?” Daimon wondered.

Batou scowled a bit. “So what, the guy is walking around with a biothetic fleshy computer in his pocket?”

“After everything we’ve seen with this case, Batou, that’s the hardest point to believe here?” Motoko poked fun at him.

“Disturbing is what it is!” he fussed back.

“He’s already using the people of Niihama as his proof of concept,” Paz pointed out. “I wouldn’t put it past the guy for having a flesh computer in his pocket.”

“Everything about that sounds dirty,” Motoko teased, standing up and folding her arms. “But this makes it even harder to trace who Mikami actually is. We still don’t have a sound way to detect biothetics. For all we know, he could’ve been using this biothetic fleshy pocket computer to trigger the radio signal broadcasts.”

“Given the files on the biothetics, I wouldn’t put it past the guy,” Mori admitted, plugging the cords into her neck ports and pulling her recent memories. “The guy’s capable of hacking the darkNet gates, I’m sure of it. I bet that’s how he was able to figure out who I am and realize I’d taken the data before he was able to destroy it.”

“And here we thought the darkNet was unreachable,” Togusa commented.

“It’s a playground,” Mori replied with a bit too much glee. She pulled up a few files on the screen as well as a playback of a memory from the attack. “There he is, the darkNet-traversing douchebag.”

“The same one that I encountered in the Section 2 database and the one that has been visiting Ami,” Motoko leaned forward. “Exactly like the file recovered from your transmission.”

“You won’t live long enough to find that out. Will you…..Kasumi Mori.”
Mikami’s words played a haunting tune in the tech room, as did the files she’d recovered from her memories.

Paz squinted at the screen more than usual. “That voice does sound familiar. I don’t remember it from a case.”

“Yeah it does,” Togusa agreed. “But why?”

“Because we work with him,” Saito realized.

“Wait, are you suggesting what I think you are?” Batou questioned, scowling more than usual.

“I’ve heard the voice over the cybercoms,” Saito recalled. “Remember that case we worked on, the one where someone was hacking police helicopters?”

“Yeah, the one who tried to copy my work as Jupiter,” Mori scoffed. “Poorly.”

“That’s the one,” Saito nodded. “There were four of us in the field that day when the hacker nearly took down my helicopter.”

“And three of us are here right now,” Togusa recalled. “That leaves one person who has been here all along...”

“It couldn’t be,” Motoko stared at the doorway. “That cellphone he’s always playing with.....”

“A damn fleshy pocket computer!” Batou hissed. “That bastard! Where the hell is he now?!”

“Wait wait, now hold on a second,” Togusa blocked the door. “If we attack him while he has the biothetic computer, he could potentially harm those infected.”

“So what, we’re gonna let him have reign of the place while he goes about commanding his damn
“There’s still a possibility this could be a mistake,” Togusa worried.

“The evidence is pretty damning,” Daimon folded her arms.

“Mori, tap into the systems,” Motoko ordered, leaning over the chair again. “Check for any signals that are going in and out that aren’t authorized and have traces of the darkNet.”

Batou shifted angrily behind her, attempting not to jump Togusa and run after the kid.

“Ishikawa, check the security system,” Motoko added. “I want to know if he’s still in the building.”

The two began to work with the network, quickly accessing the systems and scanning for the requested information. Mori swore she’d never attempted to scan a system with such urgency before. The possibility that Aozora was actually Mikami made her blood boil. He would’ve known she was a darkNet specialist, but to track her so deep into the darkNet, he could’ve done it right there in the building.

“Dammit.” Mori slammed her hand on the keyboard. “There’re traces, but they’ve gone cold.”

“No signs of him in the building either,” Ishikawa frowned. “But there’s something worse. Proto is now missing. I don’t see signs of him anywhere in the building.”

“I thought he was sick,” Daimon stared at him.

“Technically,” Motoko answered first. “Proto isn’t like us. He isn’t a ghost in a cybernetic body. He’s an advanced AI, a biological android. He became sick after listening to the radio broadcast Mikami has been using to control the infected people.”

“A biological android,” Mori mouthed the words. “A bioroid. I heard chatter about that when I was diving for information on biothetics. There were rumors that a bioroid would be the perfect marriage between flesh and machine.”
“And exactly what Mikami would want,” Ishikawa reasoned.

Batou hit the back wall with his hand. “Dammit! The hell did he go?!”

“Back the feeds up. Trace where he went,” Motoko barked the command with urgency.

“See if you can find any information about the darkNet signals, Mori,” Togusa added.

Daimon folded her arms, shifting her weight. “I want to break his face.”

“You’ll have to get in line for that one,” Batou hissed.

Togusa scowled. He wanted to doubt that Aozora was Mikami, but Daimon was right. The evidence was pretty damning. He just couldn’t believe that a mole had existed in his team right under his own nose. He’d worked with Aozora on cases. The kid was sharp until he started entrenching himself in that cellphone game. Or what seemed like a cellphone game.

Fleshy biothetic pocket computer.

Togusa nearly visibly shuddered.

“Still no traces,” Mori slumped back in the chair, nearly defeated. “He’s good, better than I thought. Might be his obsession with older technology like the radio waves, so I’ve put out a few of my own old-school algorithms. It may take time, but I’m going to hunt the bastard across the network myself.”

“The CCTV feeds don’t tell us much more either,” Ishikawa frowned sharply. “He seemingly walked up to Proto and just lead him out. Likely it was some sort of radio frequency. He may have figured out what Proto was after he got sick.”

“We didn’t tell him how, though,” Togusa pointed out.
“He probably dipped his fingers into the database or was listening to our conversations,” Mori huffed. “Damn sneaky bastard, that’s what he is. Sneakier than I gave him credit for.”

Motoko glanced over at Togusa. The situation was hitting him hard. He was likely blaming himself for not noticing sooner, but Aozora had pulled the wool over all their eyes. She stepped up, taking leadership so that Togusa could regain his composure. “We need to find him, digitally and physically. Find out everything you can about Aozora and look for patterns. I’m taking several of you out into the field myself. We have to find Proto and to stop Aozora from doing something reckless at all costs.”

Chapter End Notes

Whelp. Looks like we should never trust people with unusual last names in this series. First Gouda, now Aozora.

I also wanted to see how many times I could get away with biothetic fleshy computer. It’s far too much fun to write.
Chapter Summary

With Proto now kidnapped (bioroid-napped??), Section 9 sets out to finally put a stop to Mikami’s work and to locate Proto before it’s too late.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Do you really think he could be here?” Togusa leaned back in the driver’s seat.

“That’s just it,” Daimon sat awkwardly in the passenger’s seat as she attempted to twist, watching the nearby house on the quiet street in the nearby neighborhood. Her height was working against her in Togusa’s smaller car. “Aozora’s smarter than we gave him credit for. He’s probably thinking of all sorts of ways to evade us. The last place we’d probably look is his own home.”

“The idiots are more likely to return to their own home,” Togusa pointed out. He’d done enough cases with the police to know that was a pretty usual pattern. “Aozora’s no idiot.”

“He’s not,” Daimon agreed. “That’s the problem. He’s outsmarted us for months. He’s probably got his head so far up his own ass that he thinks he’s untouchable even after the raid on the salt factory. He got away with kidnapping Proto right under our noses.”

“Any luck?” Aramaki’s voice came over the cybercomm.

“There’s a light on, and his car is still in the driveway,” Daimon replied. “But still can’t figure out if he’s really that arrogant or if this is a decoy.”

“Any signs of him having a housemate?” Togusa wondered.

“Only a house cat named Kuroneko-sama,” Ishikawa chimed in.

“Of course he’d name it after an old anime,” Daimon scoffed.
"I'm surprised you'd know that, Daimon," Mori teased. "I thought you didn’t watch anything but sports anime, though last I checked, you were watching Sailor Moon."

"Stop hacking my anime stream and go back to sticking your nose in the darkNet, Mori," Daimon fussed.

"Sailor Moon, really," Togusa arched an eyebrow at her. That was the last anime he expected Daimon to watch. She was powerful and very rough. He just couldn’t imagine her watching a magical girl anime.

"It’s a classic," Daimon pointed out. "Nevermind that. Look. There’s movement in the window, though I think it’s the cat."

Sure enough, a silhouette of a rather fat black cat hopped up into the window, ruffling the curtains. It stretched then rounded itself into a lump as it sat there, lording over the outside world from its perch.

"That is a fat cat," Togusa commented.

"No kidding," Daimon agreed. "Didn’t take him for the type to spoil his pet. When this is all over, I’m taking that cat. It doesn’t deserve to not have a home after this."

"Didn’t take you for the pet type," Togusa observed.

"Sometimes we need a little reminder of our own humanity," Daimon stated simply.

"Daimon, what’s the license plate on that car in the driveway?" Motoko’s voice interrupted the conversation.

"NH-a1805," Daimon read off the license plate. "Blue Honda. It matches the plate and make Ishikawa found."
“Interesting,” Motoko commented. “I found the exact same one parked at a warehouse down at the harbor.”

“Damn sneaky bastard!” Batou shouted over the cybercomm.

“Well I just saw one pull up to the coffee shop here,” Paz reported, “but a hot woman stepped out of the car. Nothing out of the ordinary with her though. No glassy-eyed look.”

“CCTV picked up one passing by the office here,” Ishikawa added.

“There’s one downtown,” Saito reported. “But it belonged to an old couple.”

“A wild goose chase,” Aramaki commented. “Daimon, Togusa, Major, infiltrate your locations discreetly. The rest of you, keep a watch on your targets. Likely they’re all decoys but we want to be absolutely sure.” He quickly received confirmation from the agents distributed across the city. The CCTV recordings showed that Aozora had left with Proto in his car, driving out of the building parking garage. Aozora likely knew they’d see this, covering his tracks by planting decoys around the city. “Any luck in finding traces of him or Proto?”

“Not yet,” Ishikawa shook his head. “It’s almost as if he’d taken Proto offline or thrown him into autistic mode. He’s no longer connected to the Net.”

“No signs of any auctions on the black market yet either,” Mori reported. “No announcements or threatening letters or press releases. Nothing. A big fat load of nothing. I’m really worried. Some of the darkNet chatter about bioroids is downright obsessive.”

“I really don’t want to know what you’ve dug up, Mori,” Ishikawa admitted.

“I’m wishing I didn’t read it,” Mori shuddered. “It’s going to give me nightmares, I’d say.” The forums spoke about theories and circuitry on the surface, but deeper posts spoke about disassembly and even more destructive ideas about how to deconstruct and rebuild a bioroid out of synthetic and sometimes even human parts. She just wanted Proto to be okay. “I’ll keep searching. Aozora isn’t perfect. He’ll trip up somewhere.”

Across Niihama, Daimon and Togusa approached the door completely cloaked with thermoptic camouflage. The fat black cat sat in the window, watching over the front yard. Its tail twitched
impatiently as it watched a bird flit into one of the trees.

Quietly the pair crept up to the front door. Daimon approached first, pulling a small toolkit from her pocket, opening it and placing something on the door. With one of the tools, she picked the lock, the door quietly opening just a bit.

“Where did you learn to pick locks?” Togusa inquired on a private channel. “Do I want to know?”

“Mori’s a bad influence,” she replied.

“I was honestly expecting some secret past identity like Mori has,” Togusa admitted.

“I served in the military in a covert investigation squad, that’s about as secret as you get from me,” Daimon admitted. “Unless you mean my stint as the university’s linebacker is incriminating.” She pushed the door open a bit more, peeking into the house. The cat hadn’t moved from its perch.

“I think you not being a linebacker in an American Football team would be more surprising honestly,” Togusa pointed out. She had the build for it, naturally tall and muscular even without the cybernetic enhancements on her body. She once arm wrestled with Batou and kept up with him for a moment before she had given in to his cybernetic strength.

She pushed open the door a bit more. “No signs of movements.” The house was unexpectedly traditional with a standard entryway for shoes with a raised platform for the rest of the house. It was covered in tatami mats with a dining room table low to the floor and surrounded by pillows. A cat tree stood in the corner, various cat toys littered the floor. As she stepped up to the platform, feeling rude for not taking her shoes off, the cat suddenly started staring at her. “That cat is watching us.”

“It’s just a cat,” Togusa insisted as he quietly shut the front door behind them. He peered at the fat black cat. It looked like an ordinary cat, fluffy and friendly and spoiled. “Though we never did encounter a need to hide from a cat before.”

The cat hopped off the windowsill, staring at the pair for a moment as if it could see them through the camouflage. It meowed then turned towards the other room, padding over into it with a bit of a purr. Daimon peered around the corner, watching the cat curl up in the cat bed shaped like a tiny futon. “There’s a computer in that room.”
“See what data you can find,” Togusa instructed. “I’m going to take a look around.”

“Understood.” She approached the room, her footsteps nearly silent. The cat no longer seemed interested in her, simply content to curl up in its bed. For a moment, she wondered if the cat were trying to tell her that the room was there, but perhaps Togusa was right. It was just a cat.

She sat down at the computer, pulling some cables out of her pocket. It was an older computer but it still had ports to interface with it. She wasn’t the most adept at diving but she’d done it once before. She usually left that to Mori to handle.

Files flew past her as she dove in a stream of blue and green data. She paused to flip through some of the files. Documentation on biothetics, circuitry diagrams, code that made her head spin. Mori would have a field day with these. The files were pretty incriminating. Aozora was definitely Mikami without a doubt. This computer had no connection with the Net. There was no way these files were a plant.

She pulled out of the dive, copying all the hard drive’s contents into a removable format. She pushed through a few files on the desk, noticing a box sitting on the edge. Boxes so far had been nothing short of unsettling, but she reached forward to grab it. It was an ordinary shoe box with ‘bioroid’ scrawled across the top. She stared at the box. Why would it have that word on it?

“Have any of you found something?”

Aramaki’s words surprised her, causing to fumble with the box. This whole situation was unsettling, enough to shake even her. She noticed Togusa even seemed a bit unnerved as well. “A whole slew of files, something Mori and Ishikawa will greatly enjoy,” Daimon reported. “As well as a box simply labeled ‘bioroid.’” She carefully opened the box, hoping it wouldn’t be another fleshy finger computer. She’d seen enough of those already. “It contains…… Is that a cyberbrain? Oh god.”

“Bring that box here,” Aramaki instructed. “Get as many files as you can.”

“Roger.” The transfer was nearly complete. She stood up, staring at the cat. The poor fluffy creature was just a bystander in all of this. It sure seemed sweet, just sleeping there curled up in the bed. “By the way. I want to keep Kuroneko-sama after this. I want that cat. I need something to remind me that humanity isn’t all bad after this.”
The cat here is really just a cat. I had considered having it be a cyber-kitty or one that Proto had been transferred into, but that idea was scrapped in favor of Daimon finding a cyberbrain in a box. Because that's pretty unsettling.

References:
Kuroneko-sama: "Lord Black Cat" from Trigun
Sailormoon: Daimon and Mori were originally Sailor Moon Ocs, so Daimon watching Sailor Moon is a reference to her origins.
Chapter Summary

With a cyberbrain from a shoebox now in their possession, Section 9 investigates into who or what is left within the brain. It seems that Aozora might have some humanity left within him but is it really enough to be redeemable at this point?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Do you think we can get him up and running?” Mori stared worried at the cyberbrain preserved in the container in the technology room. “Is this really him? Could it really be Proto?”

“Proto runs on a synthetic cyberbrain,” Aramaki explained. “It’s entirely possible that this one is actually him, which means that Aozora has taken his body somewhere. How he got the cyberbrain out without damaging his body is the mystery.”

“Or why,” Motoko pointed out. “However, if someone is walking around in Proto’s skin, we’ll be able to find them once they connect to the Net. And that’s a likely possibility if that is their intent.”

“Or disassemble him,” Mori cringed.

“Something tells me he might not do that,” Motoko admitted. “It’s something he’d said to Ami when he nearly deleted her accidentally. He said that he was doing this for her.”

“That’s an oddly specific thing to say,” Togusa commented.

“It is,” Motoko agreed, “and I’ve been trying to figure out why he’d said that. Ami had lost her physical body some years ago due to illness, merging herself with the Section 2 database. After that, the Mikami avatar began to visit her. He knew her, so he likely had seen her suffer through the illness.”

“I get where you’re going, Major,” Ishikawa realized. “Proto’s body is technically biological but also a machine. What better place to put a ghost living in a database to give her physical form once again?”
“There are plenty of cybernetic body manufacturers, but her mind rejected them before,” Mori pointed out, staring at the screen as she flipped through the files Daimon had recovered. “And he’s obsessed with biological computing. The biothetics are flawed, but Proto is a stable prototype bioroid. In other words, Proto’s body is superior.”

“That’s creepy,” Togusa admitted.

“Even I’m creeped out by this, I’d say,” Mori agreed. “There are hundreds of files here from the Net about theories on bioroids and biological computing. He’d pulled them then destroyed their traces. Looks like some of these files might actually be some of the missing Section 2 files as well. He’s absolutely obsessed.”

“He could’ve easily recoded Proto’s cyberbrain and transferred Ami right into it,” Ishikawa pointed out, linking the case to the computer. “And stranger, he left this in plain sight. This is either a trap or he still has a soft spot for Proto.”

“A soft spot?” Motoko questioned.

“I’d find them talking about technology once in awhile here,” Ishikawa recalled. “I caught them playing games in the break room once.”

“Maybe there’s some humanity left in him,” Motoko reasoned, “just a smidge, but nothing quite redeemable. He wanted us to find the cyberbrain, drawing us into his house knowing we’d try to find him there.”

“Alright, here we go,” Ishikawa drew up some images on the monitor. “I have the cyberbrain connected in a closed environment in case this is some sort of trap.”

“We already know what types of viruses he’s capable of creating,” Borma agreed. “But I’m really hoping it is actually Proto.”

The screen flickered on, several colors of lines streaming horizontally in both directions until the picture seemed to clear up.
“A playback?” Ishikawa observed.

“His mind may be trying to retain whatever he witnessed,” Aramaki reasoned. “He’s about as close to human as an AI can be. He could be trying to tell us something.”

Images of a warehouse flickered in and out in shades of green and low resolution, as if displaying an image of an older CCTV feed. The image was sideways as if the camera was laying on its side.

A few people walked by, none of which particularly seemed zombified. One in a lab coat stopped before the video, their face not seen but they were holding a clipboard and a pencil.

“Who uses pencils anymore?” Mori commented.

“That would match up with the strange love of old technology with Mikami and pals,” Daimon pointed out.

“So this is a bioroid,” the lab coat commented. Her voice was somewhat garbled by the poor quality of the playback. “He’s staring. Is he….”

“Don’t worry about it,” the familiar voice came into view. It was Aozora wearing a rather nice looking suit, contrasting the industrial look of the background. “I’ve disconnected him from the Net. Whatever’s here won’t be seen. Can you remove the brain?”

“But I can see it…..” the voice overlaid the video. “I’m still here……”

“That’s Proto’s voice,” Daimon recognized it immediately.

“Remove it?” the lab coat questioned. “It’s sufficient enough to house the ghost, Mikami.”

“I said remove it!” Aozora hissed. “And don’t damage the cyberbrain. I want him alive.”

While her face wasn’t visible, the lab-coated woman’s hands fidgeted on the clipboard, indicating some manner of uncertainty. “I’ll see what I can do.”
“If his cyberbrain is damaged, you might corrupt the rest of the body,” Mikami added sharply. “All your research and work will be for naught if that happens.” He turned sharply, straightening out the suit with surprising care. “And don’t dawdle. Section 9 isn’t dumb. I’ve hidden our trail, but it’ll only be a matter of time before they figure out where we are.”

The lab coat huffed as Aozora left.

The feed cut out for a moment, returning as if the image had been flipped to the other side.

“Major…” Proto’s voice spoke out over the video. “Come here……”

The video flickered a bit but for the first time, they could get a view of the warehouse where he was being kept.

“Wait wait, can you pause the feed?” Mori nearly leapt over the keyboard and chairs. “There,” she tapped on the screen. “Is that a logo?”

“I’ll be damned,” Ishikawa squinted at it. “Not the greatest resolution but we should be able to find something with it.” His fingers flew over the keys, carefully copying the image from the video feed onto another screen. Algorithms began to work at the image, trying to clarify the pixels and sharpen the image. It was various shades of green, just like the image, but there was definitely a logo there.

“I feel like I’ve seen this logo before,” Mori leaned on the back of the chair, staring at the monitor.

“Yeah, I feel like we have,” Ishikawa agreed.

“I know it,” Daimon frowned sharply. “That’s the Ogami Biologics emblem with the stupid finger on it, isn’t it? We’ve chased enough of their bags.”

Ishikawa squinted at it, pulling up the data file on Ogami. “I’ll be damned. How did you see that so quickly?”
“Daimon’s good with patterns,” Mori explained. “It’s why you never challenge her in shogi. She uses patterns for strategy and games. Just ask Togusa. She trashed him in their match.”

“Color me impressed,” Ishikawa admitted, turning back to the monitor. “Now after the raids by Section 2, Ogami’s only known warehouse was condemned. Supposedly it was scheduled to be demolished, but that was cancelled for unknown reasons.”

“Probably Aozora interfering,” Togusa reasoned.

“More than likely,” Ishikawa agreed. “I’ve forwarded the address to your cybercomms.”

“Motoko! I need your help!” The screech of a cry came across Motoko’s private cybercomm, causing her to nearly jump.

“Hold on a moment,” Motoko informed the group. “Ami, what’s wrong?”

“He’s here!” her voice was panicked. “Mikami! He’s trying to take me away. I don’t want to leave!”

“Mikami’s already made his move,” Motoko relayed the message. “He’s accessed our database in an attempt to draw Ami out of it.”

“Major, Mori, dive in and stop him in the digital world,” Aramaki quickly instructed. “Ishikawa, Borma, stay here to relay messages and try to get Proto back online. The rest of you, join the others and raid that warehouse. We need to close this case and stop Mikami before he does more harm than good.”

Motoko nodded. There was enough damage already with the high body count and the plague-like infection across the entire city. Ending this was absolutely necessary. “You got it, Chief.”

Chapter End Notes

Mikami’s one twisted guy but at least he seems to have a little bit of humanity left in him. Be it because Aozora actually likes Proto or respects what he is, Proto is now back in Section 9’s hands.
I had this wild idea of shoving Proto's essence into an Operator's body because he arrived in the mail as a pile of memory chips, but I ended up going with this idea instead. GitS runs on Cyberbrains and Proto should be no different. And this idea ended up being a bit more unsettling in the end, especially with Ami's involvement.
Mori and Motoko dive into the database to confront Aozora. A clash of desires and moral beliefs as Aozora and Ami finally speak now knowing Mikami’s identity. Will Ami hear him out or will this devolve into a war?

Mori had to focus. Sure she was diving into the database next to her idol’s very attractive avatar, but Mori also knew well the reason why they were here. Aozora was attacking and trying to pull the database’s ghost out of it, likely to put into Proto’s body. It was a weird twisted objective she thought she’d only find in fiction in the darker corners of the Web.

Mori had sent much of her research to Aramaki, letting him know what chatter she’d found about bioroids since this whole biotech mess began. It wasn’t as though she wanted to circumvent Ishikawa and keep him uninformed. It was that she didn’t want to subject him to it. The research was unsettling at best, the video feed pulled from Proto’s cyberbrain only reinforcing the research and causing her stomach to turn.

Right now, she was in digital form, so she fortunately didn’t have to worry about throwing up. Normally she’d be concerned about the virus that Aozora was capable of generating, but Borma was monitoring their dive, ready to deploy any antivirus protocols at a moment’s notice.

She jarred from her thoughts as Motoko dove further ahead. Before them was a swirling vortex of data and imagery like some sort of Van Gogh painting of a storm rolling in over the horizon. Aozora was in there, being a douche. She wanted to give him a piece of her mind.

Motoko peered over her shoulder, indicating with a simple, swift motion that the two should approach from two directions. “Our first priority is to protect Ami.” As Mori headed off over the storm to approach from the other side, Motoko approached the storm first. Cloaking wouldn’t do well in this battle. Aozora had somehow mastered the digital world with biotech, but he wasn’t alone. Motoko had mastered it with cybernetics.

She dove into the storm from the top, head first, using the momentum to rocket herself down to the familiar form of Mikami. Ami had done well to resist him, keeping her distance which gave Motoko the prime opportunity to strike. At the last second, Mikami noticed her descent, leaping backwards. Motoko impacted the ground sharply, causing the digital illusions to ripple just slightly
as she stood back up to her whole height. “Stop this madness, Aozora.”

“Madness?!” Aozora hissed. “You don’t understand a thing, do you, Major?”

She stepped between Aozora and Ami. “You want to give her a physical form again by using Proto’s body.”

“A physical… form…?” Ami gasped.

“We found Proto’s cyberbrain,” Motoko continued. “His memories told me everything.”

Aozora scoffed. Motoko couldn’t tell if he was irritated or planning something. Perhaps both. Aozora had been so confident and so slick, but now his stance more read a cornered rat that likely would attack. “*Keep your distance for a moment, Mori.*” Perhaps she could keep him talking until the other team found his body.

However, that could still pose a problem. Aozora wasn’t cybernetic. He used a biothetic computer to dive into the Net. He was likely still conscious at the warehouse, probably waiting until he could pull Ami into Proto’s body.

“Mikami,” Ami spoke first to break the silence. “No, Aozora. To think all this time, it was you who kept visiting me.” She knew him. She’d worked with him in Section 2 when she still had a physical form, but not once had he said his real name in the digital world. “Why did you never tell me your name?”

Aozora fell silent for a moment.

“I’ve known it was a false name from the start, but you were always so nice to me, helping me complete a digital chess set,” Ami admitted. “You look like an anime character, though I must admit with everything that’s been happening lately, *Deathnote* seems like an appropriate source for your digital persona.”

“I’ve had it long before this all began,” Aozora admitted, talking through Motoko to Ami, “before I learned about biothetics. I enjoy the classics.”
“Major! I’m here for backup!” one of the Tachikoma AI’s announced.

“Keep your distance outside the database,” Motoko instructed. “Send a stream of what’s happening back to Ishikawa.”

Ami hadn’t moved from her spot behind Motoko just yet. “What changed, Aozora? When did you go from the ambitious agent I loved to someone wielding a metaphorical death note and experimenting on Niihama?”

“You died!” Aozora hissed.


“You could’ve lived on with biothetics!” Aozora insisted. “Even with the flaws, you could’ve lived outside the digital world!”

“And live because others have sacrificed themselves to grow biothetics?” Ami pointed out sharply. “I’d rather live in a database shell for eternity!”

“Mori, stay on the ready,” Motoko informed her companion. “Aozora might become unhinged.”

“Well if Ami doesn’t deck him first,” Mori commented, listening in on the conversation by tapping into the Tachikoma’s data stream. She couldn’t blame Ami if she did. Aozora had done all of this rather stomach-churning work for someone who wanted to just live in her digital world in peace. He had no right to force this change on her.

Aozora lurched forward, hand outstretched to grasp at Ami. Or perhaps at Motoko, since she stood between them. Despite the digitizing his hand held, that same data-erasing virus he could wield, Motoko grasped his arm and prevented him from reaching Ami.

He looked rather surprised that Motoko could counter his attack with just one hand and an incredible grip. She pushed his arm backwards, forcing it to bend at the elbow and causing him to withdraw the virus to prevent infecting himself.
“You’re not the only one with full control of the digital realm,” Motoko informed him sharply. In the short time she’d been back, he’d barely had any interaction with her. He’d stuck mostly to the fleshy cellphone computer, barely paying attention to the mission at hand and constantly pissing off Batou. Though that last one wasn’t as hard to do.

“Mori, come protect Ami,” Motoko instructed. “I’ll take care of him myself.”

“So much for the popcorn and the show. I’m on my way.” Mori manifested in the database in a streak of pixellated colors before taking form and placing a hand on Ami’s shoulder. “Let’s watch from a safe distance.” Ami offered Mori a concerned expression, but deep down in those blue eyes, Mori could see the anger at what Aozora had done.

He attempted to thrust the other hand at Motoko with the same intent, but she’d caught his hand once again, pulling him forward only to swiftly kick him backwards with inhuman force.

Aozora stumbled backwards, barely catching himself on a digitized bookshelf. “Cybernetics shouldn’t have this much control!” he insisted. “That’s their flaw! That’s why biothetics could be superior once the kinked are worked out.”

“If you’d gotten to know me, you’d know that I’ve been fully cybernetic for a long time,” Motoko informed him sharply. “It’s neither flesh nor machine that dictates the control of a prosthetic body. It’s the mind within them and how strong their drive is.”

Motoko stood tall, balling her hand into a fist. She planned on giving him a good thrashing. Waiting for the other team be damned. After what he’d said to Ami, she felt like kicking his digital form until it was pixellated black and blue. It wasn’t his ghost since he couldn’t dive, so causing irreparable physical damage wasn’t a possibility. What stood before her had to be some manner of projection. She would simply entertain him until the others could break the connection or Aozora broke it himself.

“I apologize for the mess this will cause, Ami,” Motoko stated.

Ami opened her hand as if to say ‘go ahead’, then folded her arms, standing near Mori for protection. She was upset. This wasn’t the Aozora she’d fallen for. That man had long since died emotionally. That sweet, ambitious Aozora was long-since gone.

Motoko leapt into the air, disappearing into a collection of pixels and reappearing behind him.
Swiftly she kicked the avatar’s head, sending him careening into the bookshelves in a mess of digital books and files as she landed softly back on the ground.

He managed to unbury himself from the volumes of books and files now littering the floor. He looked shocked and horrified, like he’d just experienced the latest rendition of *The Grudge* in immersive holographic form. Everything he understood was falling apart. Motoko, the cybernetic woman, had bested him in every way possible. Ami had rejected him. Section 9 was likely on their way. He couldn’t let this all go to waste.

He extended a hand. He had to try one more time. “Ami, come with me.”

She shook her head sharply in reply. “You deserve everything that comes to you.”

His expression contorted into anger. He was losing everything, but it didn’t have to be that way. There was still a chance to salvage this. Standing up, his form was swept away like digital pixels, leaving the pile of digital books in his wake.

Ami wanted to shake with anger. But as she was just a ghost, it didn’t work so well and came across as a jitter of pixels. So she turned, pulling Mori into a hug and just stayed there. “I can’t believe it… I just can’t.”

Mori scowled at the pile of books. “This isn’t the Aozora we trained with anymore. Or perhaps he simply had been like this all along, biding his time and waiting for the opportunity and resources to do this.”

“And being in Section 9, he had access to many resources,” Motoko frowned.

“Motoko,” Ami murmured into Mori’s avatar. “Take him down. This isn’t the Aozora I know anymore either. He needs to be stopped.”

“We know his location,” Motoko informed her gently. “The rest of the team is heading there now.” She tapped into the group cybercomm. “Aozora has withdrawn from the database. Ami is safe, but he’s pissed off now. He might become even more reckless than before.”

“We’re almost there,” Togusa informed them. “We’ll take him down.”
Ami finally emerged after a few moments. She would’ve cried furious, hurt tears if she were still capable, but that Ami was long since gone. She’d been merged with her own database for so long, she didn’t want to be living in the outside world. Her home was here in the database.

“You’ll be okay, right?” Mori questioned. “Emotionally, and all.”

“In time,” Ami knelt down to pick up one of the displaced books. Algorithms for chess. How fitting given that she used to play chess with Aozora frequently. “I’m more concerned about Proto and whoever else he harmed on this ridiculous quest of his.”

Mori frowned sharply. The body count was already high. She couldn’t imagine what else he had up his sleeve given the files she’d recovered from the darkNet. There was enough horrors about growing biothetics and experimentation that urged her to abstain from diving for a month. She wanted to go hug her wife after this was all over. She needed a reminder that people were still good.

“They should be able to piece Proto back together right?” Mori attempted to focus on a potential positive. “I mean after we scrub his body clean. They’ve had their grubby fingers on it.”

“If we can’t, the Chief would know someone who does,” Motoko reasoned.

“Who doesn’t the Chief know?” Mori was pretty certain he knew the entire country of Japan, and there was a good chance that was actually true.

Motoko cracked a bit of a smile. “There’s a mystery I doubt we’ll ever solve.”

Ami busied herself with picking up some of the books as she listened to their conversation. The shelves were destroyed so she found another place to store them. She cleared the table off, knocking all the chess pieces off into a garbage bin before setting the books down carefully. Perhaps it was symbolic, but it was also wholly satisfying. Aozora thought himself king, but in a game of chess, even kings could fall. It would be Section 9 who was victorious. She was certain of it.

Chapter End Notes
While the fighting isn't as intense in this chapter, it's meant to be pretty symbolic. SAC likes to play a lot with social issues and believes and here, you have the clash of Ami and Aozora's beliefs about how Ami handled her own death. Aozora thinks she should've taken the risk and gone biothetic while Ami took a more moral path and fused herself with a database. Ami doesn't want to live on knowing her life was built upon the backs of others. Literally.

Perhaps it's best not to tell her how many have already died.
Chapter Summary

Section 9 finally closes in on Aozora. It's time to end this biothetic nuisance, but what could await them in a warehouse of horrors?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Tachikoma sped down the roadway at high speeds, weaving between the cars and trucks on their daily commute. None of the team had said much along the way. The situation was pretty dire. Proto was kidnapped, Aozora had betrayed the group, and now the latter was trying to forcibly remove the database ghost from her new home.

“Come on, faster, dammit!” Batou hissed. The Tachikoma sped up, intent on helping complete this mission. It couldn’t quite understand why Aozora had suddenly betrayed Section 9, but urgency had taken over curiosity as there were people in danger.

The warehouse came into view, sitting on the edge of the harbor in a building that looked like it had seen better days. The signs had been torn down. Rusted trucks sat in the parking lot. The fence had fallen into disrepair. The Tachikoma leapt over the walls, landing and continuing to zoom towards the warehouse. As they approached, they activated the thermoptic camouflage to stay hidden.

Motoko’s warning came across the cybercomms as the team had arrived.

“Alright, split into two pairs and approach from the indicated doors,” Togusa instructed. “Keep your camouflage on. Our target is the central holding room.” He leapt from the Tachikoma, landing on the cement. The parking lot was hauntingly quiet, only sounds of the seagulls and the boots of the team speaking above the silence.

“Something doesn’t feel right,” Batou fussed. “Saito, do you see anything?”

“Nothing yet,” he reported, linking in with the satellite as the helicopter made an approach. It kept its distance, landing on a helipad a block away to keep from being noticed. “Only a few scavengers at the far door.”
“Scavengers?” Togusa questioned. “Homeless?”

“No, more the animal kind. A couple of mongrels.” Saito watched the dogs through the scope. “They’re scratching at that door like they want in.”

“That’s a little strange,” Paz commented. “Unless there are bodies in there that’re decomposing.”

“I really don’t want to think about that,” Togusa admitted. “But if there are, we’ll need to find them and rescue anyone that’s alive.” The biothetic warehouse had been raided before, the victims rescued and returned home. Well at least those that had survived the trauma. Most hadn’t.

The four separated, Daimon with Togusa and Paz with Batou, heading in opposite directions around the warehouse. The former headed towards the front, Togusa stopping a moment and sniffing the air. “Well that doesn’t smell good.”

Daimon wrinkled her nose. As they approached the side where the mongrels attempted to get in, a smell of something wholly unnatural assaulted their noses. “You’d think they would learn, but they’re getting away with everything. I’m gonna break Aozora’s face.” She placed a hand on the doorknob but it didn’t turn. “Locked.”

Togusa glanced around. “According to the blueprints, there weren’t many other entrances except some of the openings in the rafters.”

Using some thin thread, they scaled the side of the building. They reached the balcony rather quickly and without much noise. As they reached the balcony, he peered in the small frosted window. There didn’t seem to be much activity below.

Daimon reached for the doorknob, this one turning easily and soon the pair was in the rafters. She glanced around, pulling up the blueprints in her mind to gain her bearings. “It looks like the rafters stop between the rooms. We’ll need to descend.”

Togusa took to descending using the thread, Daimon following suit as leaping from the rafters would be too noisy. She nearly bumped into him when he’d stopped, a hand cupped to his ear. “Do you hear that? It sounds like people mumbling but it sounds sad.”
“I hear that too,” Daimon agreed.

“Let’s go,” Togusa instructed, leading the way to the edge of the room. He pressed against the wall, hearing the sad sounds grow louder. Peering around the corner through the door, he quickly pressed himself back against the wall. He felt his blood boil. “Children. They’re using children and adults to grow biothetic parts.”

Daimon peered around the corner and quickly regretted the decision. There were people suffering, laying on mats with things growing out of them. “They’re using the people like a farm. He really did stoop that low.”

“We’ve found a literal farm of people in the west warehouse room. We need to help them,” Togusa called out over the group’s cybercomms. He rounded the corner, keeping close to the far wall and tracing the cabling across the ceiling to a workstation nearby.

“Oh, just when I thought he couldn’t stoop any lower!” Batou hissed over the comms. “You think that working with us would deter him from stupid crap like this!”

Daimon followed Togusa, keeping a watch on his back for any supposed scientists or the culprit from springing at them. She needed that cat right about now, something to remind her that there was still good left in this world.

“Given what he’d said here in the database, he may have lost himself long ago,” Motoko chimed in. “He’s likely been planning this since he busted the case on the original Ogami.”

Togusa looked over the computers for a moment, muttering something about passwords. He pulled a few cables from his pocket, plugging them into the computer then plugging them into a small box. The box ran several protocols, making quick work of the security protocols. “It looks like this is a custom operating system. It shouldn’t be too hard to shut down, but I’ll need time.”

“Might wanna work fast there, Togusa,” Batou warned. “There’s movement towards your direction.”

“And we just found Proto’s body,” Paz added. “We’re heading your way. This place is teaming with scientists. We can’t retrieve him just yet.”
“I’ll handle hold down the fort until you get here,” Daimon volunteered, drawing her weaponry. She pressed herself against the wall near the doorway.

Togusa worked with the computer, systematically shutting off the biothetic equipment carefully one by one. He peered over towards the victims. They seemed to survive shutting off the systems, starting to stir just a bit and mumble even more. He continued the work slowly, ensuring that the systems didn’t adversely affect the victims here.

“The hell do you mean the system is malfunctioning!”

“It’s Aozora,” Daimon hissed into the cybercomm. “He doesn’t seem to realize we’re here.”

“These systems are supposed to be failproof!”

“They are sir.” The voice belonged to the woman in the lab coat from Proto’s video feed. “They are isolated without any means to connect to the network. They could only be affected by the inside. If they had-----”

“They can boast all they want,” Aozora scoffed, drawing closer to the room, “but there’s no way they could find this place just yet. I’ve covered all our tracks.” His voice seemed a bit concerned, given that Motoko had mentioned Proto’s memories had revealed who he was, but there was no way they could find this place. He’d made sure those memories had been damaged.

“I see them. I’ll keep them out of the room.” Daimon slipped out of the room, keeping towards the wall as Aozora and his scientist lackey approached. Withdrawing her rifle from its place on her back, she pulled it backwards, striking the scientist in the back of the head with it.

Aozora gasped as the scientist crumpled to the floor. He leapt backwards, narrowly missing Daimon’s second attack aimed at him. He withdrew a simple revolver from his pocket, shooting in a direction he thought someone was, smirking when he heard an audible gasp and Daimon’s thermoptic camouflage flickered off.

“Damn, he’s quick,” Daimon grasped at her arm. “He got me and my camouflage stopped working.” She dodged as he attempted to shoot her again, combat rolling towards the center of the room. He attempted to shoot a few more times as she dove behind some conveyor belt machinery. “Damn, how many rounds does that handgun have?!”
He fired off a few more rounds at the conveyor belt. “You’re more clever than I thought.”

Daimon pressed herself against the machinery, grasping her arm. He could shoot at the machine as much as he wanted. It kept him off the others. Togusa needed to rescue those people. The other two were on their way. There was also Saito outside keeping an eye on the building. She wasn’t alone.

Batou and Paz had quickly approached. Paz threw a number of swipes with a knife while Batou attempted to punch Aozora into the ground. Dodging each attack, Aozora waved a hand. A digitized trail followed his fingers, disabling the camouflage for a moment.

“The hell?!” Batou hissed, leaping backwards as the camouflage flickered.

“You all don’t see the marvel of biothetics, do you?” Aozora stood tall once again, his hand held out in front of him to show off the biothetic attachment he wore on his hand like a glove. “It’s like wielding magics.”

“By growing the parts on people, you dumbass!” Batou hissed. “You busted apart this damn operation, for god’s sake!”

“Do you know how boring Section 2’s work is?” Aozora pointed out sharply. “Ami was the only thing that made that job bearable, and when she died, it was nothing but boredom and the hardass chief breathing down your neck. Until the Ogami case came along.”

“And so you thought it was a good idea to do this?” Paz questioned.

“All you people with your cybernetic enhancements think you’re so much better than the rest of us,” Aozora hissed. “Finally we had something for the rest of us, for those who can’t be cyberized like Ami and me. She could’ve lived if Section 2 had just approved the damn permits!”

“Right, and with all the flaws and possibilities for rejection, this was a perfect idea,” Paz pointed out.

“And people don’t reject prosthetics?” Aozora shot back sharply.
“There are regulations for that now!” Batou nearly decked him. “And what about the people you’ve killed with your radio code?”

Aozora scoffed. “All new technologies require sacrifice, just like prosthetics did when they started. I’m continuing Ogami’s work for the betterment of all.”

“You’re full of shit!” Batou shouted.

“Don’t think you’re better than me, old man!” Aozora hissed.

“The shutdown of the system is almost complete,” Togusa reported.

“About damn time,” Batou fussed, taking a swing at Aozora and striking him in the shoulder. He was tired of hearing Aozora’s self-righteous bullshit. It was time for action.

The hit sent the man several feet backwards and into the ground, skidding a bit before he rolled over and landed on his feet. Aozora grasped at his shoulder. Dislocated, likely, but nothing that couldn’t be fixed with a bit of science.

He turned for the door. He still had all of Ogami’s research and thousands infected by biothetics. He could still prove their worth and create a new form for his beloved Ami. Prosthetics were outdated, and people needed to see it.

Dashing away from the agents, Aozora made for the door. He could still salvage this. Curling his shoulder, he burst through the side door, stumbling into the parking lot.

“He’s seriously running after that speech?” Paz scoffed.

“I’ll take that bastard down myself,” Batou huffed. Turning in his combat boots, he headed for the door, stopping only when Saito began to speak over the comms.

“I have the shot,” Saito informed the team. He could see Aozora quite clearly in his scope, fleeing
the building. He was an easy target in the parking lot. It was fully, truly. Aozora knew the team. He knew Saito. To think there wasn’t a sniper on the roof was a surprising misstep but it was the advantage they needed. “I’m going to take it.”

And so the shot rang out, breaking the silence.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted to make Aozora deplorable.

And you'd think working with Section 9, he'd realize that using people as a farm never works out the way you want it to when you're a villain. But Aozora sees himself the hero in this story. Pity he's full of shit.
Permanently scarred - CONCLUSION

Chapter Summary

With Aozora now fallen, Section 9 reconvenes for a debriefing and follow-up. Let's hope that Proto got his body back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“That is one twisted man,” Ishikawa commented. “We’ll have to put this in the books as another messed up case we don’t want to revisit.”

“I thought I wanted to know what happened at the warehouse, but this is going to give me nightmares for a month, I’d say,” Mori frowned.

“The irony of the situation is that when Saito took out his leg with the shot, it had to be amputated,” Motoko added. “As his body has rejected cybernetic implants, it seems like he’ll be permanently scarred by the mess he caused with no alternative for prosthetics to walk again. Not in the near future, at least.”

“The irony,” Batou commented.

“Aozora aside, it looks like many of the people from the warehouse will survive this time,” Togusa reported. “There will be trauma, but that’s something that can be worked through. Word from the hospital is that the farm victims can be returned to their families soon.”

“And with the information recovered from Aozora’s home computer, we’ve developed a means to remove biothetics from those infected,” Ishikawa added. “For those who aren’t aware they’re infected, it may be harder to track them down to remove the biothetics, but at least radio signals aren’t common enough to affect them. I did consider slipping the antibiotic into the coffee, honestly.”

“I don’t think I ever want to have coffee again after that,” Togusa admitted.

“I’m pretty sure none of us do,” Paz agreed. “Though Mori practically lives on it.”
“I’m swearing off it,” Mori held her hands up in surrender. “I’ll stick to overly caffeinated soda from now on.”

“Fortunately the word about the sea salt has been kept hidden, so the Kuma Coffee chain isn’t shut down for something like this,” Togusa added. “It wasn’t their fault, after all, and the chain has been around for a long time. It’d be a shame to see it go, even if we never do visit again.”

“Section 2 is under audit at the moment, or so I hear,” Motoko added. “Seems that Sekiguchi isn’t responsible for the cover up. His adverse reaction to the questioning was really just him being an ass. And with Ami now happily living within our database, there’s no risk of her being harmed or pulled with their audits.”

“How is she taking the whole case?” Togusa questioned.

“Surprisingly well,” Motoko replied. “Because of how much Aozora had changed, she admitted it was like losing a stranger when he was arrested. She’s back to organizing and even has challenged Daimon to a chess match.”

“Who actually won that?” Mori wondered.

“It was a draw,” Daimon replied.

“Two strategic geniuses going at it in a chess game,” Mori knit her hands behind her head. “I’d like to see a rematch. Come to think of it, I’d like to see Daimon and the major challenge each other.”

“I’m pretty sure you want to stare at me and not the chess game,” Motoko pointed out.

“I am happily married, thank you,” Mori huffed. She welcomed the sudden interruption when the door of the meeting room slid open. “Proto! Welcome back! How are you feeling?”

“I am happy to be me again, Miss Mori,” Proto replied. “Healthy and without whatever the Collective wished to do with me.”
“He’s clean and without viruses, put back together like he’d never been taken apart,” Borma offered him a hearty pat on the back.

“I still feel dirty,” Proto admitted. “What he planned to do with my body simply because I am biological circuitry. It’s rather unsettling.”

“Well you were the victim of a case of the body snatchers,” Mori pointed out.

“Let’s not get creepy here,” Motoko teased, turning back to Proto. “I’m confident that will go away. Just give it time.”

“I definitely plan to, Major,” Proto nodded. “Honestly, I would rather get back to work soon. I unfortunately cannot forget what has happened though I have considered routines to marr the memory just a bit. However, a distraction would seem best.”

“Give it time. Something’s bound to crop up,” Batou pointed out. “That’s how things work around here.”

“I do hope you will be staying with us, Major,” Proto said, “even after a case like this.”

“I am here to stay,” Motoko nodded. “Even with the corruption we encounter here, it’s being able to do something about it that’s important.” Drifting around the Net just didn’t give her the satisfaction that solving a case could. She had been a free agent during those three years, but during that time, she also felt the most restricted. It was only here that she truly felt free.

“I suppose that is welcome back,” Togusa admitted. “I was hoping for a welcome back party or something a bit more mundane.”

“The hell do you think we work?” Batou laughed.

“I don’t think we’ll ever have a normal party, though going out for drinks isn’t out of the question,” Ishikawa agreed.

“Drinks will have to wait,” Aramaki interrupted as he entered the room. “We have a new situation
at hand, one that requires our immediate attention.”

“No rest for the weary, it seems,” Togusa commented.

“The hell do you mean?” Batou fussed. “We’ve had three days with nothing to do. Daimon even had the chance to go home and coddle that fat cat.”

“I don’t coddle,” Daimon shot back.

“Please don’t tell me Ogami has somehow resurfaced so quickly,” Ishikawa frowned sharply.

“Thankfully no,” Aramaki shook his head. “That case has drawn to a close, the warehouse completely cleared out to prevent any chance of Ogami from actually returning.”

“That’s good to hear, Chief,” Motoko admitted. “What’s the situation this time?”

“Seems we have another lockdown on our hands,” Aramaki explained. “A known robotics company has been overtaken by a group of assailants dressed as ninja.”

“As ninja?” Mori nearly leapt on the case. “Now there’s a case I want to investigate!”

“That honestly is the weirdest thing I’ve heard all month,” Paz admitted.

“Alright everyone…. Togusa glanced at Motoko. With the Major back, he wondered if he were the one to lead the teams still.

She simply offered him a nod. He could lead this team still, she had no objections. After all, he could continue to grow into the strong leader he was becoming.

Togusa nodded in return. “Alright, everyone, let’s move out.”

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for reading! This is my first time writing a story like this, and it was a pretty wild ride. I had to work backwards in the story to ensure every detail was where it should be, everything from the placement of the chess set to the first mention of biothetics and pissing Batou off with Ogami bags.

There's honestly a wealth of 90s-2000s references in this from the red dress from the Matrix to Sailor Moon and Trigun references. But the big one was definitely Deathnote. I was searching for names for the villain, and I came across Mikami and Ogami. Both were referencing gods and that seemed perfect for the megalomaniac Aozora. And so the references to Deathnote, everything down to how Aozora was playing god and his avatar's distinct appearance, fell into place.

And so that concludes my first GITS fanfic. I hope you all enjoyed it!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!